

interzone

FEBRUARY 2000

NUMBER 152

\$ 5 95

'Colours of the Soul'

Sean McMullen

plus new stories by

M. Shayne Bell

Keith Brooke & Eric Brown

Liz Williams

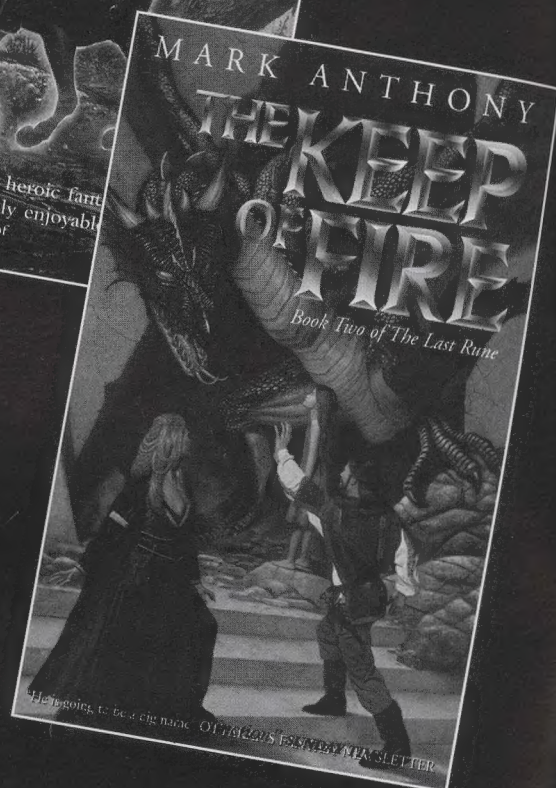
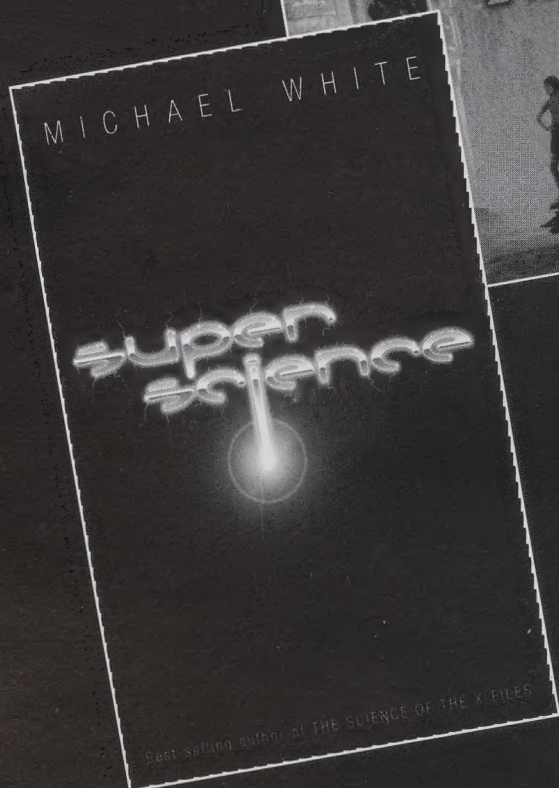
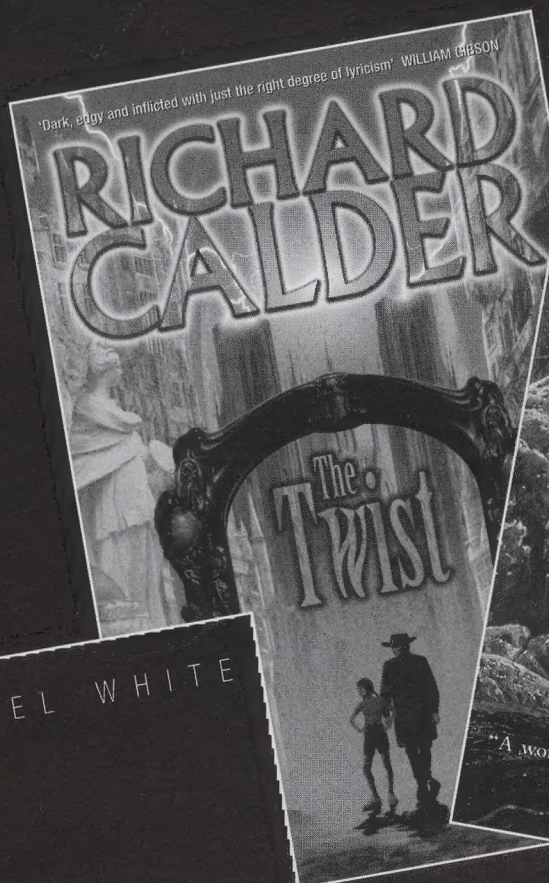
Zoran Zivkovic



plus BRUCE STERLING • DAVID LANGFORD • NICK LOWE

EARTHLIGHT

Here, Now, and in the Future



Available from all good bookshops



EARTHLIGHT

Earthlight is an imprint of Simon & Schuster



Vignettes by SMS

Editor & Publisher
David Pringle
Assistant Editors
Andrew Tidmarsh
Andy Robertson
Consultant Editor
Simon Ounsley
Advisory Editors
John Clute
Malcolm Edwards
Judith Hanna
Lee Montgomerie

Graphic Design and Typesetting
Paul Brazier

Subscriptions Secretary
Ann Pringle

Interzone
217 Preston Drove, Brighton BN1 6FL,
United Kingdom.

All subscriptions, back-issue orders,
general correspondence, books for
review, and enquiries about advertising
should be sent to this address.

Subscriptions:
£34 for one year (12 issues) in the UK.
Cheques or postal orders should be
crossed and made payable to *Interzone*.

Overseas subscriptions are £40,
payable by International Money Order.

Payments may also be made by
MasterCard, Visa or Eurocard: please
send your cardholder's name, initials
and address written in block letters,
with card number, card expiry date and
signature. (*Note: overseas payments
will be charged at the £ sterling rate.*)
Alternatively, American subscribers
may pay by dollar check, drawn on a
U.S. bank, at \$60. (All copies to other
continents are sent by Air Saver, i.e.
accelerated surface mail.)

Lifetime subscriptions:
Lifetime subscriptions: £340 (UK);
£400 (overseas); \$600 (USA).

Back-issues
of *Interzone* are available at
£3.50 each in the UK (£4 each
overseas), postage included.
(US dollar price: \$6 Air Saver.)

All issues are in print *except* numbers
1-2, 4-13, 15-24, 31, 33, 37, 51 & 60.
Order them from the address above.

Submissions:
stories, in the 2,000-6,000 word range,
should be sent singly and each one
must be accompanied by a stamped
self-addressed envelope of adequate
size. Persons overseas please send a
disposable manuscript (marked as
such) and two International Reply
Coupons. *We are unable to reply to
writers who do not send return postage.*
No responsibility can be accepted for
loss or damage to unsolicited material,
howsoever caused. Submissions should
be sent to the Brighton address above.

interzone

science fiction & fantasy

FEBRUARY 2000

Number 152

CONTENTS

Fiction

COLOURS OF THE SOUL

Sean McMullen

Illustrations by Dominic Harman

6

THE WINDOW

Zoran Zivkovic

15

AT BUD LIGHT OLD FAITHFUL

M. Shayne Bell

23

DOG YEARS

Liz Williams

27

THE DENEBIAN CYCLE

Keith Brooke & Eric Brown

32

Features

CHAIRMAN BRUCE'S NEW MANIFESTO

Guest editorial by Bruce Sterling

4

ANSIBLE LINK

News by David Langford

20

MUTANT POPCORN

Film reviews by Nick Lowe

21

BOOK REVIEWS

*Mike Ashley, Paul J. McAuley, Chris Gilmore,
David Mathew and Paul Brazier*

49

Cover by Roy Virgo

Published monthly. All material is © *Interzone*, 2000, on behalf of the various contributors

ISSN 0264-3596

Printed by KP Litho Ltd, Brighton

Trade distribution: Diamond Magazine Distribution Ltd.,
Unit 7, Rother Ironworks, Fishmarket Road, Rye,
East Sussex TN31 7LR (tel. 01797 225229).

Bookshop distribution: Central Books,
99 Wallis Rd., London E9 5LN (tel. 020 8986 4854).

Funded by
**THE
ARTS
COUNCIL
OF ENGLAND**

In 1914, the lamps went out all over Europe. Life during the rest of the 20th century was like crouching under a rock.

But human life is not required to be like the 20th century. That wasn't fate, it was merely a historical circumstance. In this new *Belle Epoque*, this delightful era, we are experiencing a prolonged break in the last century's even tenor of mayhem. The time has come to step out of those shadows into a different cultural reality.

We need a sense of revived possibility, of genuine creative potential, of unfeigned *joie de vivre*. We have a new economy, but we have no new intelligentsia. We have massive flows of information and capital, but we have a grave scarcity of meaning. We know what we can buy, but we don't know what we want.

The 20th century featured any number of -isms. They were fatally based on the delusion that philosophy trumps engineering. It doesn't. In a world fully competent to command its material basis, ideology is inherently flimsy. "Technology" in its broad sense: the ability to transform resources, the speed at which new possibilities can be opened and exploited, the multiple and various forms of command-and-control – technology, not ideology, is the 20th century's lasting legacy. Technology broke the gridlock of the five-decade Cold War. It made a new era thinkable. And, finally, technology made a new era obvious.

But too many 20th-century technologies are very like 20th-century ideologies: rigid, monolithic, poisonous and non-sustainable.

We need clean, supple, healthy means of support for a crowded world. We need recyclable technologies, industries that don't take themselves with that Stalinesque seriousness that demands the brutal sacrifice of millions. In order to make flimsy, supple technologies thinkable, and then achievable, then finally obvious, we need an ideology that embraces its own obsolescence.

The immediate future won't be a period suitable for building monuments, establishing thousand-year regimes, creating new-model citizens, or asserting leaden certainties about anything whatsoever. The immediate future is about picking and choosing among previously unforeseen technical potentials.

Our time calls for intelligent fads. Our time calls for a self-aware, highly temporary array of broad social experiments, whose effects are localized, non-lethal and reversible – yet transparent, and visible to all parties who might be persuaded to look.

The Internet is the natural test-bed for this fast-moving, fast-vanishing,

The Manifesto of January 3 2000

Bruce Sterling

start-up society. Because the native technology of the coming years is not the 19th century "machine" or the 20th century "product." It is the 21st century "gizmo."

A gizmo is a device with so many features and so many promises that it can never be mastered within its own useful lifetime. A gizmo is flimsy, cheap, colourful, friendly, intriguing, easily disposable, and unlikely to harm the user. The gizmo's purpose is not to efficiently perform some function or effectively provide some service. A gizmo exists to snag the user's attention, and to engage the user in a vast unfolding nexus of interlinked experience.

The gizmo in its manifold aspects is the *beau ideal* for contemporary design and engineering. Because that is what our culture will be like, at its

heart, in its bones, in its organs. A gizmo culture. We will go in so many directions at once that most of them will never see fulfilment. And then they will be gone.

This is confusing and seems lacking in moral seriousness – but only by the rigid standards of the past century, bitterly obsessed with ultimate efficiencies and malignant final solutions. We need opportunities now, not efficiencies. We need inspired improvisation, not solutions. Technology can no longer bind us in a vast tonnage of iron, barbed wire and brick. We will stop heaving balky machines uphill. Instead, we begin judging entire techno-complexes as they virtually unfold, judging them by standards that are, in some very basic sense, aesthetic.

Henceforth, it is humans and human flesh that lasts out the years, not the mechanical infrastructure. Our bodies outlast our machines, and our bodies outlast our beliefs. People will outlive this "revolution" – if spared an apocalypse, human individuals will outlive every "technology" that we are capable of deploying. Waves of techno-change will come faster and faster, and with less and less permanent consequence. Waves will be arriving with the somnolent regularity of Waikiki breakers. This "revolution" does not replace one social order with another. It replaces social order with an array of further possible transformations.

Since gizmos are easily outmoded and inherently impermanent, their most graceful form is as disposable consumer technology. We should embrace those gizmos that are pleasing, abject, humble, and closest to the human body. We should spurn those that are remote, difficult, threatening, poisonous and brittle.

Most of all, we must never, ever again feel awestruck wonder about any manufactured device. They don't last, and are not worthy of that form of respect.

We must engage with technology in a new way, from a fresh perspective. The arts traditionally hold this critical position. The arts are in a position today to inspire a burst of cultural vitality across the board. The times are very propitious for the arts. There's a profound restlessness, there's money loose, there are new means of display and communication, and the nouveau riche have nothing to wear and nothing that suits their walls. It's a golden opportunity for techno-dandyism.

Artists, don't be afraid of commercialization. The sovereign remedy for commercialization is not for artists to hide from commerce. That can't be done any more, and in any case, hiding never wins and strong artists don't live in fear.

INTERFACE



Instead, we have a new remedy available. The aggressive counter-action to commodity totalitarianism is to give things away. Not other people's property – that would be, sad to say, “piracy” – but the products of your own imagination, your own creative effort.

This is the time to be thoughtful, be expressive, be generous. Be “taken advantage of.” The channels exist now to give creativity away, at no cost, to millions. Never mind if you make large sums of money along the way. If you successfully seize attention, nothing is more likely. In a start-up society, huge sums can fall on innocent parties, almost by accident. That cannot be helped, so don't worry about it any more. Henceforth, artistic integrity should be judged, not by one's classic bohemian seclusion from satanic mills and the grasping bourgeoisie, but by what one creates and gives away. That is the only scale of non-commercial integrity that makes any sense now.

Freedom has to be won, and, more importantly, the consequences of freedom have to be lived. You do not win freedom of information by filching data from a corporate warehouse, or begging the authorities to kindly abandon their monopolies, copyrights and patents. You have to create that freedom by a deliberate act of will, think it up, assemble it, sacrifice for it, make it free to others who have a similar will to live that freedom.

Ivory towers are no longer in order. We need ivory networks. Today, sitting quietly and thinking is the world's greatest generator of wealth and prosperity. Moguls spend their lives sitting in chairs, staring into screens, and occasionally clicking a mouse. Though we didn't expect it, we're all on the same net. We no longer need feudal shelters to protect us from the swords and torches of barbarian ignorance. So show them words and images: make it obvious, let them look. If they're interested, fine; if not, go pick another website.

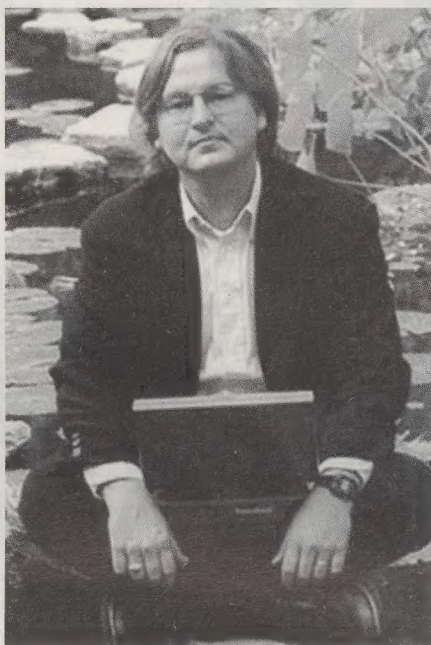
The structure of human intellectual achievement should be reformatted, so that any human being with a sincere interest can learn as much as possible, as rapidly as their abilities allow. The Internet is the greatest accomplishment of the 20th century's scientific community, and the Internet has made a new intelligentsia possible.

Like the scientific method, the Internet is a genuine, workable, verifiable means of intellectual liberation. Don't worry if it's not universal. Awareness can't be doled out like soup, or sold like soap. Intellectual vitality is an inherently internal, self-actualizing process. The net must make this possible for people, not by blasting flags and gospel at the masses, but by opening doors for individual minds, who will

then pursue their own interests.

This can be made to happen. It is quite near to us now, the trends favour it. The consequences of genuine intellectual freedom are literally and rightfully unimaginable. But the unimaginable is the right thing to do. The unimaginable is far better than perfection, because perfection can never be achieved, and it would kill us if it were. Whereas the “unimaginable” is, at its root, merely a healthy measure of our own limitations.

Human beings are imperfect and imperfectible, and their networks even more so. We should probably be happy for the noise and disruption in the channel, since so much of what we think we know, and love to teach, are mistakes and lies. But nevertheless, we can achieve progress here. We can



remove some modicum of the fatal, choking constraints that throughout centuries have bent people double.

A human mind in pursuit of self-actualization should be allowed to go as far and as fast as our means allow. There is nothing utopian about this programme; because there is no timeless justice or perfect stability to be found in this vision. This practice will not lead us toward any dream, any City on a Hill, any phony form of static bliss. On the contrary, it will lead us into closer and closer, into more and more immediate contact, with the issues that really bedevil us.

Before many more decades pass, the human race will begin to obtain what it really wants. Then we will find ourselves confronted, in our bedrooms, streets, and breakfast tables, with real-world avatars of those Faustian visions of power and ability that have previously existed only in myth. Our aspirations will become consequences.

That's when our *real* trouble starts.

However, that is not a contemporary problem. The problems we face today are not those sombre, long-term problems. On the contrary, we very clearly exist in a highly fortunate time with very minor problems.

The so-called human condition won't survive the next hundred years. That fate is written on the forehead of the 21st century in letters of fire. That fate can be wisely shaped, or somewhat postponed, or brutally annihilated, but it cannot be denied. It is coming because we want it. It's not an alien imposition; it is borne from the inchoate depths of our own desires. But we're not beyond the limits of humanity, suffering that, exulting in that. We're just going there, visibly moving closer to it. Once we get there, we'll find no rest there. The appetite of divine discontent always grows by the feeding.

This dire knowledge makes today's scene seem quite playful and delightful by faux-retrospect. Our worst problems, which may seem so large, diffuse, and morbid, are mere teenage angst compared to the conundrums we're busily preparing for some other generation.

Sober assessment of the contemporary scene makes it crystal-clear that a carnival atmosphere is in order. We exist in a highly disposable civilization that is hell-bent on outmoding itself. The pace of change is melting former physical restraints into a maelstrom of reformattable virtualities. That's here, it's real, it is truly our situation. We should live as if we know this is true. This is where our own sincerity and authenticity are to be found: in the strong conviction that the contemporary is temporary.

We need to live in these conditions in good faith. We need to re-imagine life and make the new implications clear. It's a murky situation, but we must not flinch from it; we must drench all of it in light. Because this is our home. We have no other. Our children live here. The mushroom clouds of the 20th century have parted. We find ourselves on a beach, with wave after frothy wave of transformation. We have means, motive, and opportunity. Spread the light.

Henceforth, it will make more and more sense to base our deepest convictions around a hands-on confrontation with the consequences of technology. That's where the action is. On January 3, 2000, that's what it's about. The deepest resources of human creativity have a vital role there. It's where inspiration is most needed, it's the place to make a difference. Come out. Stand up. Shine.

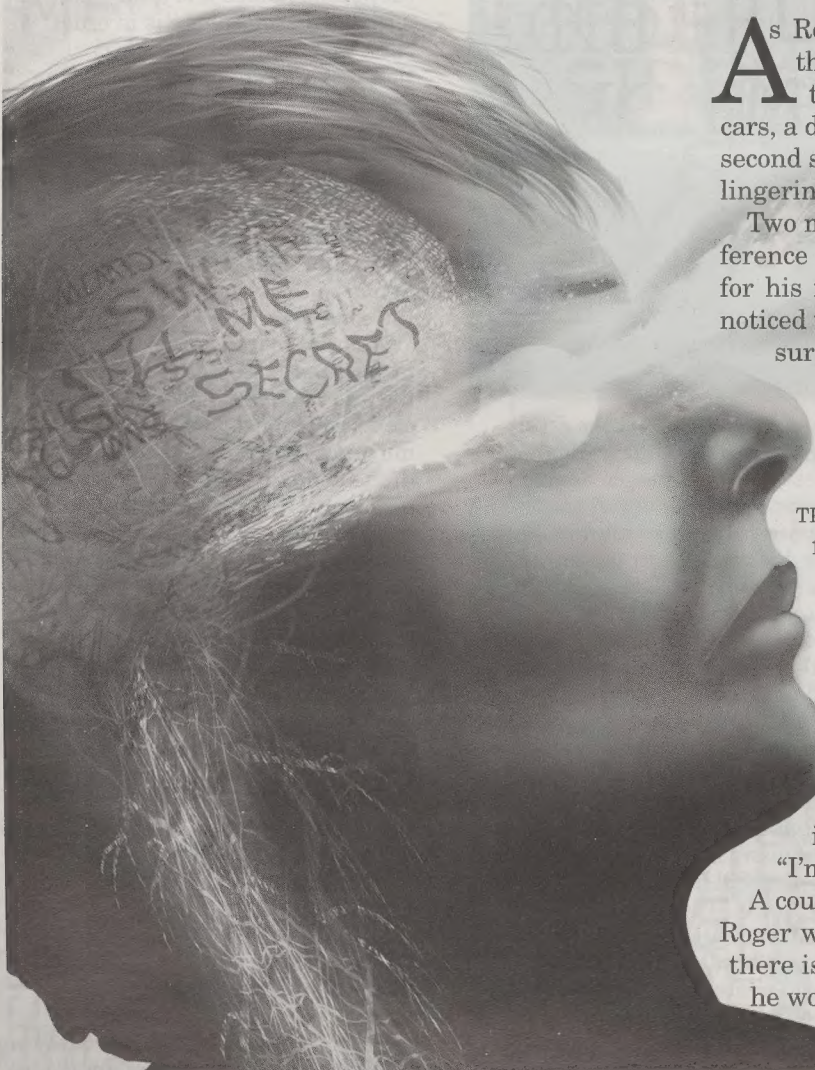
Turn the lamps on all over the world.

Bruce Sterling

www.well.com/conf/mirrorshades/

COLOURS *of the* SOUL

Sean McMullen



As Roger walked along the almost deserted street there was a strange sheen in the plumage of birds, the stonework of buildings and even the duco of cars, a dark, gunmetal blue mixed with violet. It was the second symptom of TPS virus. The first had been a mild, lingering fever that he had mistaken for influenza.

Two months earlier he had been in Europe for a conference on road safety standards, and as he sat waiting for his flight home in a Swiss airport lounge he had noticed the fever and a feeling of lethargy. It was hardly surprising. He travelled a lot, and was always among the first to fall victim to whatever newly mutated pathogens were infecting the crowded world.

Antibody tests revealed an infection with the TPS virus, and an examination of his eyes confirmed it. There were slight changes in the refractive index of the cornea, aqueous humour, lens and vitreous humour, and in the cellular structure of his retinal receptors.

"You will soon be able to see in ultra-violet light," the clinic optician had declared through his respirator.

"I'm becoming an ultra."

"That's an unduly emotional way of putting it."

"I'm feeling unduly emotional."

A couple wearing respirators hurried past, glancing at Roger with the frightened, hunted look of hares when there is a scent of fox on the air. What are you hiding, he wondered? Is it from everyone, or just each other?

It was a mild day in early spring, yet the parks were left to the birds and

stray dogs. A body lay beside a nearby bench. A drunk or junkie sleeping something off, or...? Suicides had become so common among ultras that newscasts now reported daily statistics instead of individual names.

The Road Traffic Authority was a complex of low-rise buildings and courtyards, rather like a small university. Like every other organization, it was operating on a fraction of its regular staff, and all of those were either infected or newly vaccinated. The doors sensed Roger's proximity card and slid open to admit him, while registering his presence with Security.

He was boiling water for coffee when his supervisor, Carolyn, arrived with a presentation folder. She was wearing ultra-violet specific sunglasses, and the skin of her face scintillated with coruscating gunmetal highlights on a dark violet base.

"How are you doing?" Roger asked after a few brisk pleasantries.

"Same as last week and the week before that," she sighed, sick of the question.

"Have you tried lock-in yet?"

"Not when the price of seeing into someone else's mind is having them perving into mine."

TPS was short for Transmission Protocol Syndrome. Also known as telepathy virus, it generated a simple but effective form of telepathy in humans. It had been recognized for what it was three months earlier, by which time over a million people were infected worldwide. It was an anomaly, a blood disease with a capacity for airborne transmission. Coughs, sneezes and international air travel had spread it very effectively.

TPS made a small concession to privacy. Before involuntary thought-sharing could begin, people needed to synchronize the movement of the ultra-violet patterns on their skin. This autonomous process was called lock-in, and simply wearing ultra-violet specific sunglasses prevented lock-in with anyone else.

Slowly Carolyn took off her sunglasses and peered at Roger's face.

"Full syndrome about Sunday," she said confidently. "Think you can cope?"

"Yes, but I'll be ruined, reviled, despised and probably jailed if I ever lock-in carelessly."

"Have you got UV shades yet?"

"I bought five pairs the day I was diagnosed."

"Wise move. Well, enough of Armageddon. Have a look at this."

She handed him the weekly statistics on road trauma. Fatal, single-vehicle collisions were up by 900%. It confirmed what the media had been reporting. Roger scanned the executive summary, noting that hardly any victims had been wearing seatbelts at the time of death. They were called fakers, as they faked the accidents that took their secrets to the grave.

"Who do they think they are fooling?" Roger said as he handed the folder back. "It stands out like a terrier's testicles."

"Themselves?"

"Meantime all our work on reducing the road toll goes straight to hell. A fifth of last year's toll in one week! Incredible."

Carolyn flipped through the report and shrugged. "Perhaps not. Factor out those not wearing seat belts and the rate actually drops below average."

Roger poured the hot water into his coffee mug. Carolyn sat in his visitors' chair, hugging the report against her breasts.

"Have you given any thought to – to whether you and Marcie might lock-in?" she asked.

"Not as yet, but you know how it is. Live with someone and sooner or later you slip up."

"Luckily I live alone. Only one marriage in ten survives TPS lock-in. Are you vulnerable? Are there any little blonde whoopsies in your 15 years of conferences and diplomatic travel?"

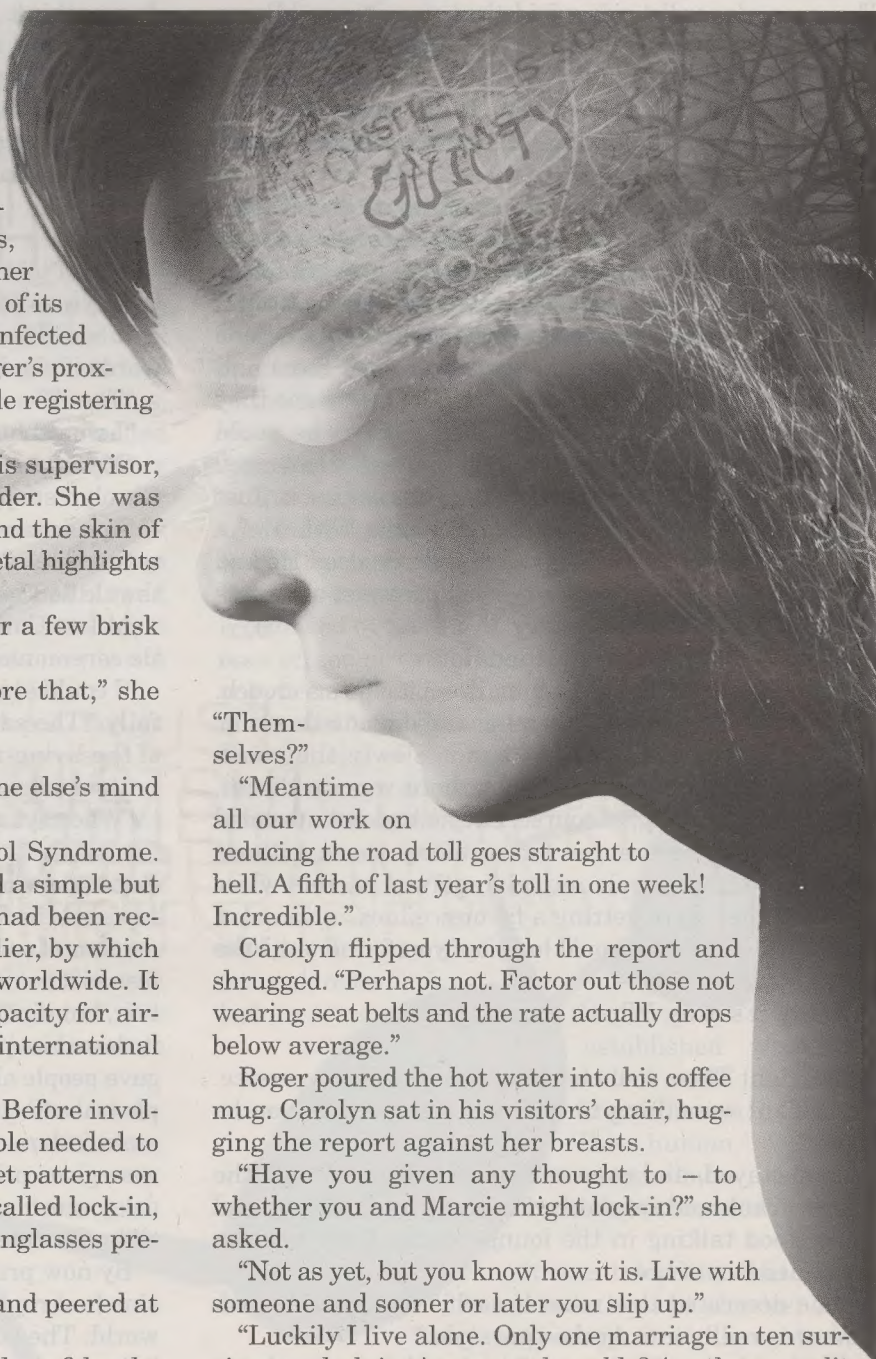
"No."

"You're joking!" she exclaimed, genuinely astonished.

"It's true. I told Marcie my only real secret last night. The big one. She was shaken, but she said she was proud of the way I had rehabilitated myself."

Roger arrived home to find his wife dead. She was wearing a neat blue trouser suit and was lying on their leather sofa as if she had fallen asleep while watching television. A crumpled note was in her hand.

Dearest Roger, I never realized what a saint you were until last night. I cannot stand you to learn my own secrets, so I must take them with me and leave. Always remember me as someone you loved. Never wonder about the beast that I concealed. Yours eternally, Marcie.



The coroner's verdict was suicide by poisoning, and Roger took the next two days off work to arrange the funeral. He was an occasional attendee at the local Uniting Church, so Marcie's service was held there. It had somewhat more dignity than the production-line funerals at the crematorium's chapel.

Marcie had been a primary school teacher, and most of her colleagues and current pupils had combined with her friends and relations to fill the church to overflowing. As Roger gave the oratory, however, he also noticed a sprinkling of young men towards the back. After a decade and a half of conferences he was good with faces and names, yet he recognized none of them. One by one they began to leave. Soon the service would end, and he would be swamped with mourners wishing him well. He slipped from the chapel and made his way to the car park. Just as the congregation began singing "Abide With Me" a man in his early 20s hurried out of the side door. He had ominously broad shoulders, tapering to a waist almost as narrow as Marcie's had been.

"Hey, it's okay, I know!" called Roger.

His quarry froze for an instant, dropping into a crouch. Roger beamed his most disarming and diplomatic smile, walked up and held out his hand. Slowly the youth straightened as he realized that there was no threat. Roger knew nothing, of course, but he had not attended international conferences for so many years without learning to trick people into giving away secrets while thinking they were getting a favour.

"Marcie – she said you'd lose it if you found out," the youth babbled. "She –"

"Okay, it's okay. What's your name?"

"Theo."

"All right Theo, come back for the rest of the service. You meant something to her, so it's important you be there."

Theo stayed, and even came to the wake. While the others drank and reminisced in the garden, Roger and Theo stood talking in the lounge room. Each held an unopened can of beer.

"She decorated this room herself," Roger explained. "She was really into Arabesque style."

"Yeah, I know. On some nights we'd come out here, crack a bottle of wine and do it on the Afghan run in front of the fire."

Roger swallowed, then nodded knowingly. A picture of Marcie was emerging, one of a vain but vulnerable woman of 37, obsessed with remaining young. She worked hard at it, in both the gym and the beautician's salon, and easily passed for mid-20s. She had cultivated youth culture, too, and whenever Roger was away she cruised clubs and gyms for men of her own supposed age. Theo had been only one of many.

"She said you'd go apeshit if you found out," Theo insisted as he finally remembered to pop his beer.

"I suppose young studs were her way of escaping middle age," Roger speculated. "Still, she must have loved me. If she hadn't she would still be alive."

"So you didn't care, you know, about guys like me?"

"Hell, I was interstate or overseas every month. What

do you think I was up to?"

Roger had in fact not been unfaithful to Marcie in 15 years, and was actually devastated. After the last of his guests had left he smashed every bottle of wine in her collection against her ornamental rock garden, then burned their bedsheets, the Afghan rug, and all of her underwear.

"But you told him you didn't care what Marcie did," said Carolyn as Roger sat in her office the following day.

"I lied. There would have been some really unpleasant words if she had confessed."

"Then?"

"I would have stayed."

"My impression is that you beat her up by proxy," said Carolyn suspiciously.

"You mean destroying the wine, frilly underwear and satin sheets? No, they were just part of a guilty secret that killed her. I was attacking the secret, not her."

At last Carolyn sighed and smiled. "Everyone has little ceremonies, I suppose."

"I could start a new cult of guilt-control," he said ruefully. "The sacrifice of adulterous knickers on the altar of the living-room fireplace."

"And cause a serious rise in domestic air pollution."

"Who says religion has no effect on the modern world?"

Roger slept in until noon on Saturday. A radio newscast reported the further spread of TPS but also a decline in the number of suicides. A new vaccine was being dispensed as fast as it could be manufactured. It did not stop TPS infection, but if administered before or during the initial fever it slowed its progress by a factor of several hundred. That gave people almost 50 years of grace, which for older people was effectively a lifetime. Government leaders, diplomats, rulers of industry and commerce, and the military were given priority for vaccination, and many said that the delay was to get as much of the population infected as possible. Citizens unable to hide secrets were easily ruled.

By now prayer-meetings of thanksgiving for the vaccine had replaced the prayers for salvation all over the world. The boom in the sales of sunglasses, balaclavas, heavy makeup and false beards was dropping off, while the sudden fashion for the Islamic veil among female non-believers was already passé.

Roger cleaned out the fireplace, ordered three sets of cotton bedsheets over the Internet, then spent the afternoon picking broken glass out of the rock garden. A cold front came through in the evening, bringing heavy rain. After dinner he drove out into the wet, windswept streets, as he did every Saturday night. Being a road-safety expert he like to anonymously observe the general standard of driving, but on this night there was little traffic to be seen. The plague-ravaged city was still weak and recuperating, and in no mood to party.

He stopped at a self-serve on the way home and topped up his petrol. As he stood before the counter he noticed that the cashier's face had the gleaming gunmetal and violet glitter and scintillations of fully blown TPS. She took his credit card and smiled at him. Roger forced a

smile back. He noticed that she was not wearing sunglasses, then –

< Pay's shit compared to selling tricks, but it sure beats being on crack >

The thought flashed through his mind, neither mentally enunciated words nor images. He blinked. The girl handed him a printout to sign.

"Don't you get, er, embarrassed?" Roger asked as he put his pen away.

She stared at him for a moment, establishing lock-in again. The rain beat against the plate glass. They were alone. Roger wondered what she was seeing in his face as jumbles of customers's faces, totals, takeaway menus, propositions and scenes from television sitcoms flashed past him. He was floundering in her short-term memory without knowing what he was doing.

< So, you're Roger / Well Roger, I spent three years hawking my body on street corners / Got raped, beaten up and robbed / For what? / My next hit of crack / I clawed my way out of all that / I'm proud of it / Until TPS came along I was just another counter chick / Now people can see where I came from and I've come a long way >

< I fancy her / Sorry / Big tits / Damn / Stop it / I've got full onset / She can read my mind / Gina, nice name >

The girl smiled again.

< I've had full onset for three weeks now / Hardly any male ultras come in here who don't fancy me / If they didn't I'd be real depressed / I worked hard to get my looks back after three years on the streets / You've just reached full onset, Roger / Think you can handle it? / Yeah, I think you will too / Eleven deaths, eh? / That's bad shit, but I've seen worse / Did she? / You didn't? / Not once in 15 years? / I've spread for a lot important people, they like the adventure of cruising street girls – >

Roger looked out into the rain, breaking the lock-in. Although shaken he made no attempt to return to his car, however.

"Your first time," Gina stated rather than asked.

"Obviously. Full onset arrived early."

"How did lock-in feel? Not so bad, was it?"

"I'll survive."

Somewhere below the counter a television chat show babbled, and TPS was the topic. Someone was taking out a class action against the government on behalf of recently infected ultras. The authorities were accused of having deliberately delayed the general release of the vaccine, and possibly even engineering TPS.

"So what do you think?" Gina asked. "Was it the government?"

"What do you mean?"

"The government. Most people think they invented TPS."

"I doubt it. TPS is centuries ahead of our science."

"Earlier tonight a customer reckoned it was aliens."

"Well... maybe."

"But you don't think so?"

"Just lately I've had to practice not thinking at all. I'd better go now."

"Sorry about your wife, Roger. If you want to talk, you

come here. I work most nights."

"Thanks for the lock-in. You... well, took some of the terrors out of it."

Roger liked the idea of aliens, even if he did not believe in them. TPS was a brilliantly engineered virus, and its action was so specific that it could not possibly have been natural. When it infected certain cells it produced proteins to shear off particular molecules in human DNA. This activated the cells to develop into new forms: skin that could flash patterns in the ultraviolet region of the spectrum, nerves that hardwired the cognitive functions of the brain to facial skin, eyes that could see in ultraviolet, and optic nerves that were hardwired right back into the cognitive areas of the brain.

The function of some nerves was thus changed from transmitting the sensation of touch to linking the frontal lobe of the brain to ultraviolet liquid crystals in the skin. Patterns were stippled onto the face, patterns that were recognized by another's brain just as easily as the words on a screen or words spoken by a tongue. The eyes had once been called the window to the soul, but now the skin of the face had become that window. The hair follicles of men's beards died, all the better to display undisguised thoughts. As one broadcast, so did one receive. The telepathy conferred was involuntary and mutual, once lock-in

established what was called TTP: Telepathic Transmission Protocol. The human race had uncontrolled telepathy whether it wanted it or not.

It was telepathy that obeyed the known laws of physics, chemistry and biology. One's thoughts were merely displayed on one's face, then recognized by one's lock-in partner. Once the thought patterns were synchronized the brains maintained a polling protocol. The eyes passed the thought patterns directly to the brain, where they were recognized as easily as local thoughts.

Initial recognition of what the virus was really doing brought hysteria, riots, quarantines and crash research programmes. Exceedingly delicate and lengthy surgery could sever the nerves transmitting the thoughts to the skin of the face, leaving the patient unable to achieve lock-in. The problem was that the mechanism unlocked by the virus was very tenacious, and able to regenerate the severed nerves over a matter of weeks. Fortunately for civilization, the vaccine had been developed very quickly.

Roger arrived home to find a message from Carolyn on

his answering machine. She sounded strangely agitated, and asked that he return her call. He tapped Dialback, and she answered after a single ring.

"How are you keeping?" she asked, now in a soft monotone.

"I'm ultra," replied Roger. "I did an accidental lock-in with a checkout girl tonight."

"And?"

"I'm wrung out. Think I'll demolish half a bottle of Famous Grouse and go to bed."

"No handful of sleeping pills?"

"Absolutely not."

There was silence on the line for some seconds. Roger could not even hear breathing from the other end.

"Carolyn?"

"I'm still here. Roger, what do you think when you're ticked off with me? Really ticked off. Be honest."

"I suppose..." He sighed and began again. "Every time you annoy me I think 'Screwed her way to the top.'"

"Really?"

"Sorry, I know it's cruel. You got there by hard work and initiative, I know that better than anyone."

"It was more than hard work," Carolyn replied slowly, the strain evident in her voice..

Roger waited, but she could not go on. Whatever it is, it's difficult, he thought.

"You lead a team that has halved the number of road deaths in this country in five years," he prompted. "Unless you killed someone to achieve it, what else matters?"

"Have you ever wondered how I got my big chance at only 31?" she suddenly snapped. "What got me the appointment in a male-dominated field? Roger, I screwed a cabinet minister, two parliamentary secretaries, and so many other government minions that it doesn't even bear thinking about. I chose powerful, vulnerable men who were easily blackmailed."

There was nothing that could be said to a revelation like that. Roger sat with his mouth open, and almost dropped the receiver.

"Roger? Hullo?"

"I'm here."

"And?"

"Surprised."

"What can I say? To me sex is fun, but I can do without it. It's important as an edge, though, and it got me where I am about 15 years early. Now I get invited to graduations where I tell bright, eager young girls that hard work, intelligence and initiative can get you anywhere. I'm their role model. Their role model! What hope is there if I'm a role model?"

Roger thought for a while, and heard the clink of a bottle against a glass at the other end of the line.

"Do you despise me?" Carolyn asked.

"I can't pretend that I approve," he said after thinking very carefully, "but having got your appointment you saved a lot of lives."

"You could have done as well."

"I'm no good at decisions, I'm a planner."

"You don't understand!" she shouted, her voice rasping. "I'm a traitor to everything that I represent. I talk about

merit – and I have merit – but I cheat when I need an edge. My entire life is founded on a lie!"

"So is mine. See you Monday?"

Carolyn began to giggle, then laugh. Roger listened patiently for nearly half a minute, increasingly aware that he was urgently in need of a pee.

"Roger, some... talent scouts have been to see me. They like my work, and they know about you as well. There's an advertising campaign starting soon. Interested in quitting the RTA?"

"Perhaps. Can you tell me more?"

"Not yet, but we would be working very closely. Intimately, in fact. I had to know if you could understand. About me."

He considered for only a moment, squirming uncomfortably.

"It involves lock-in, doesn't it?"

"Maybe."

"Well, I trust you Carolyn. I've known you nine years after all. I'll say yes – provisionally. When can you provide details?"

"Soon. Tomorrow."

Roger woke early. Some neighbour was warming up a car for an early start. The sun had not even risen. TPS was destroying the world as they knew it, yet people still went for Sunday drives. Five minutes passed, then ten. There was no slamming of doors, no shouting at children to hurry up. The engine idled on. Strange... He looked at the bedside clock – 2 am.

He bounded out of bed, pausing only to snatch up a dressing gown and his cell phone before running out into the cold drizzle. Art Jamison's Range Rover was in the driveway, and a hosepipe led from the exhaust into a bedroom window that was sealed with newspaper and duct tape. Roger ripped the hose away, then flung a plaster gnome through the window before dialling for the emergency services.

By the time the police and ambulances arrived he had dragged the family onto the lawn, where they were already stirring. Art had ground up sleeping pills and mixed them into the evening meal, then dragged his three children into the master bedroom with his wife and sealed it before running a hose in from the car's exhaust. Art was dead, hanging in the laundry. Two other men in the street were in Art's Four Wheel Drive group. A man that Roger did not know was found dead from an overdose in his bathroom. His opposite neighbour, Henry Smith, was hiding in the garden shed. He was holding a shotgun to his chin, but had been unable to pull the trigger. In the spotlights of the emergency vehicles Roger saw the misery pouring out through the blotches on his face during an accidental lock-in.

As the last of the police drove off Roger stood watching beside the elderly widow from down the street. He was still in his dressing gown, and was by now soaked and shivering. She held an umbrella. A sensible, black umbrella, wide enough to shelter only one. Her face was clear of ultraviolet blotches, and she had a small commercial filter strapped over her nose.

"Word is that they were making occult sacrifices in the national parks when they were supposedly fishing," she said smugly.

"Rubbish, they were only closet bisexuals," replied Roger with exasperation. "They thought their lives would be ruined if their families, workmates and neighbours found out. Pretty stupid, really. I don't give a toss and I don't think most others would either."

"Bisexuals? How – how do you know?" she asked, shuffling uneasily on the spot. "Are you one too?"

"No. I got a brief lock-in with Henry as he was taken away."

She gasped, then backed away. "You keep clear now, I've got my rights."

"Frightened?" he asked.

"Frightened of catching TPS?"

"I have nothing to hide," she said firmly. "Nothing!"

"Nothing to hide?"

Is the most notorious gossip in the neighbourhood also the most boring? Better get vaccinated, or when people finally look into your thoughts they may see nothing. Is that what you really fear?"

The look on her face suggested that he had been passably close to the truth.

Roger spent Sunday afternoon in front of the fire, watching television. The news channel was running updates on a portentous new item every few minutes, and the announcer's normally cool enunciation was actually tinged with real excitement.

"Researchers in Greenland today announced that heavy concentrations of the TPS virus have been found in ice samples dating back over 200,000 years. Records indicate that meltback due to global warming has exposed an area that would not have been released by glaciation for 100,000 years more. Significantly, the layer of ice containing the virus was laid down at the same time as the first modern humans emerged. On-line now is Professor Matheson of the University of Cambridge. Professor, how do we know that the present form of the human race began 200,000 years ago?"

"We use reverse projections involving mutations in mitochondrial DNA in the human genome. It's a reliable method."

"There have been suggestions that aliens 'created' modern humans back then. They left the TPS virus in the ice so that it would be released when we developed industry based on fossil fuels."

"And created an artificial greenhouse effect, that's right. The ice melts back and liberates the virus, insects pick it up and pass it on to migratory birds, the birds migrate and land in your back yard. Your cat catches one, catches the virus too, then jumps onto your lap and sneezes. Very soon you have TPS."

"So you agree with this theory?"

"Oh no, I never said that."

"But if it were true, why do you think such beings would want humans to develop telepathy at this point?"

"Not being an alien, I really couldn't say," he laughed. "Maybe they wanted us to jump to a new level of interpersonal awareness just as we developed space travel, to make us better company. Then again, maybe they wanted to mess up our social organization so badly that we could not sustain an industrial society."

"Why would they do that?"

"Why make us human in the first place? How should I know what gets alien research budgets approved?"

"So you don't believe in aliens?"

"Is it really that obvious?"

In spite of the scientist's opinion, Roger's scepticism about aliens was weakening by the second. The announcer tried a different tack.

"Professor, would you agree that TPS reduces humans to the level of animals? It takes away the one thing that makes us superior: the privacy of our own thoughts."

"Why is privacy so important?"

"Well, to make secret plans, to get an edge –"

"In other words, deception."

"I... well, deception is an emotive word, but yes."

"There is nothing especially human about deception. Monkeys, birds, rats, all of them use it to gain advantage. Whether it's stealing food or mounting another's mate,



animals deceive, and they deceive because they can keep their thoughts private and get away with it."

The screen displayed the announcer in a small box in the top right hand corner. He looked uncomfortable.

"What is your point?" he asked warily.

"The capacity for advanced reasoning sets us apart from animals, not deception and secrecy. Maybe having those toys taken away will force us to grow up as a species."

The announcer was clearly someone to whom those toys meant a great deal. Roger could just discern the gleam of white filter inserts in his nostrils.

"What about freedom of choice?" he protested.

"Individual freedom of choice is a fairly new invention. Even without TPS can you be sure it will still be fashionable in a couple of centuries?"

The telephone rang. Roger keyed the television to mute and reached for the handset.

"Carolyn here. Can I visit?"

"Well, yes. When?"

"Three hours."

Around sunset Roger decided to go shopping. Thanks to his effort with Marcie's wine collection there was now nothing left to drink with dinner. Light, patchy showers were keeping the roads slippery, but there was practically no traffic. On the way home he passed the self-serve where Gina worked. There were six police cars with their lights flashing, and the place was cordoned off with white and red tape. The safety glass near the checkout counter was riddled with bullet holes.

"Move along please sir, nothing to see here," said a policewoman wearing a rain cape as Roger wound down the window.

"But my friend worked here," cried Roger, horrified.

"I'm authorized to say that there has been a fatality as a result of an attempted robbery," she replied mechanically.

"Robbery, here?" exclaimed Roger. "But this place is credit only, that sign says so in letters a metre high."

"Some people just don't read signs, sir."

Roger had no doubts about how Gina had died. Other people's secrets. People who were immunized against TPS had secrets in common with those who were infected. He had seen only the faces of convenience-store customers in Gina's mind, but she undoubtedly held faces from dimly lit streets and cheap rooming houses deeper in her memory. There were at least two dozen holes in the glass, clustered tightly. No money had been on the premises, and the shots had come from outside. This was no bungled robbery, this was a professional killing.

All the way home Roger contemplated his professional life. He might have lived relatively blamelessly, but people told him a great deal in confidence: statistics leaked for electoral advantage, bribes offered, confidential revelations about automotive quality control, and more. Of course he had the sense to be discrete, but one lock-in with the wrong person and it could all be public. It occurred to him that Carolyn was at risk too, and for similar reasons to Gina's.

Carolyn was wearing sunglasses and a dark, calf-length coat as Roger opened the door to admit her. He took her

into the kitchen, where they sat together at the breakfast bar. She was wearing the sharp, fresh perfume that she wore to the office. She was also edgy, and fiddled with her watch. Did she know that she was in danger, he wondered? Had she come over to hide?

Roger told Carolyn about Gina. She agreed that a lot of people were in serious danger, but did not elaborate.

"Did you hear about TPS virus being in the Greenland ice?" he asked as he poured out the coffee.

"Yes."

"Do you think aliens put it there?"

"I don't much care, TPS is a fact of life. Besides, if alien beings were so advanced 200,000 years ago, what could we do if they came back?"

"Wave?"

"That's about it," she said, leaning forward and clasping her hands. "Now tell me Roger, how long would it take us to get through coffee, small talk, a gin and tonic and a proposition?"

Roger gawked at her, aware that he was probably looking very stupid. He was also aware that any reply that he managed to compose in such circumstances would make him look considerably more stupid.

"Five minutes?" he ventured.

"Five minutes is too exact, too calculating. Six minutes, still suspicious: five minutes with one added deliberately. Seven minutes, ah, that has a sensual, seductive texture."

"I'll take your word for it," mumbled Roger.

"Tell me a story, Roger, tell me about your terrible secret."

"What?"

"Please. I need you to trust me. It's important."

It was not easy, and Roger made several false starts. Finally it all came out.

"At the end of my degree... well, the results had come out, and my friends and I all made it. Some of us went drinking, we lived at the university's residential colleges, so we could walk home. After the pub closed we stopped at the college car park, and I gave a couple of the girls rides around the lawn on my old motorbike. A guy named Danny had been without wheels for the previous three years, but his parents had called in and given him their second Saab for getting his degree. Mine just promised me a business suit - "

"Stay on the subject."

"Okay, okay. I suppose Danny was pissed off with having a flashy car but still being sidelined. He said he was going to a nightclub and invited everyone but me to go with him. He said I wouldn't be let in, not wearing jeans and leather. He drove off with the whole crowd: three girls and two other guys. I was left with my old Kawasaki 500, feeling pretty deflated and in danger of spending the rest of the night alone. I decided to follow Danny and see who got stopped at the door. My leather jacket reversed to suede, and my black jeans looked like smart slacks in low lighting - "

"You're wandering again."

"Sorry. Danny tried to lose me, but my bike could do everything his Saab could, and a lot more. I tailed him, passed him, gave the usual gestures. I stopped at a red light. Danny slowed, but didn't stop. The road was clear,

so I ran the light too, caught him and passed him. There was another red light and the same thing happened, except that Danny did not even slow down. Again I took off after him, and in the distance I saw another red light. Then I saw a fireball."

"A Saab, with six students," said Carolyn slowly, searching her memory. "I believe the headline was ELEVEN DIE IN HORROR SMASH."

"Danny hit a sedan containing a family of five."

"The worst two-car collision in the country's history."

"I freaked, as we used to say. I stopped at a public phone and called an ambulance – anonymously – but I didn't go near the smash. I mean what could I have done? I rode back to the college, parked my bike and made it to my room unseen. I lay there for an hour, crawling with guilt. The police knocked."

"You were seen at the pub tonight. Where did you go after it closed?"

'Straight back to college, officer, walking.'

'And your friends?'

'They left for a nightclub, in a Saab.'

'I'm sorry to inform you that your friends are all dead.' Later that month the Road Traffic Authority made me the centrepiece of their HE DRANK, HE WALKED, HE LIVED safety campaign."

"Unbelievable," Carolyn whispered. "So that's why you dedicated your life to road safety and were so tolerant and forgiving. Yet all along –"

"Guilty! Absolutely. Totally. I could have confessed about riding while drunk and provoking Danny, and that would have got me jailed and generally trashed my life. All my subsequent work on road safety would never have happened."

They sat in silence, then Carolyn checked her watch. He was aware that his pulse was racing, his mouth was dry, his hands were trembling, and that an uncomfortable pressure was building up beneath his fly. This would make entertaining viewing for the next person to achieve lock-in with him.

"I'm glad you're a stable ultra," said Carolyn. "So many are not."

She sipped at her coffee, glancing at her watch every so often. At last she stood up and began unbuttoning her coat.

"Go to the bedroom, Roger. Draw the curtains and turn on the light."

"Look, I'm not sure this is such a good idea. Marcie's only been dead five –"

Carolyn had reached into her coat and drawn out a dull grey, angular, T-shaped thing. Roger knew little about firearms, but a lifetime of television had taught him that angular, T-shaped guns fired vast numbers of bullets very quickly, and they simply did not miss. Little Nell would be a formidable opponent with one of them, Peter Rabbit would command respect. Mesmerized, he watched as Carolyn checked two spare ammunition clips in her pocket, then twisted the safety catch on the machine pistol. Obviously better trained than Peter Rabbit, thought Roger. Is this what Gina had seen through the plate glass of the convenience store, the last thing she had ever seen? Carolyn

looked up.

"Put down your hands, go turn on the bloody bedroom light, then come back here," she said impatiently.

Moments later they were in the darkened living room. Carolyn removed her sunglasses and looked through the curtains, holding something short and stubby to one eye.

"You have probably gathered that we are in immediate danger," she said quietly.

"It had occurred to me. Gina, and all that."

"Different shit, different flies. Get your car keys out and stand by the front door. When I call out just open the door and thumb your car's remote. Run crouched over. You will be driving."

Moments passed. Carolyn scanned the front yard again.

"We're stark naked by now, in a compromising position, and highly vulnerable –"

A blast of automatic gunfire and shattering glass interrupted her, but it was from the back of the house. The bedroom.

"Go! Hurry!"

Roger opened the door and thumbed the remote as Carolyn fired into one of the bushes. A dark shape staggered out onto the lawn and collapsed. She fired again, at a car across the road.

"Drive out, hurry!" she shouted as they scrambled into his car.

"The gates –"

"Screw the gates! Go!"

Carolyn was changing the clip as he started the engine, and she sprayed a sustained burst back at the house as they crashed through the locked front gates and bounced into the road. With spent shells jingling across the dashboard, they turned out of his street. Carolyn slammed another ammunition clip into the pistol. Nobody was in pursuit, and within 20 minutes they had changed cars and were driving south in an anonymous blue Fiat. Roger had said nothing since stepping through the front door.

"I – I – I never knew you were a commando," he managed after rehearsing and discarding several dozen lines.

"I'm not. This afternoon I was given two hours in a basement shooting gallery, learning to use this awful, clumsy thing. Then I got a quick course on tactical response. A very special type of course."

"They move fast," Roger commented.

"Who?"

"Whoever was after us. The Mafia, the government, global corporations, whoever."

"We move faster. Most new batches of the vaccine are actually raw TPS virus."

"You're spreading it?" he cried.

"Yes. Both vaccine and virus produce identical symptoms initially, giving us either months or until someone bothers to do some quality-control testing."

Roger swallowed, unable to even protest, his mind overloaded.

"Mind your driving, slow down," said Carolyn. "People who run the world got priority access to the vaccine, so now they are effectively immune. Then new research results – suppressed results – revealed something that nobody had suspected. Prolonged lock-in establishes a very close res-

onance between brains, enabling a temporary merging of background and expertise. Not as fast as thought, but orders of magnitude faster than speech. Creativity and lateral solution construction is consistently increased, learning can be made a hundred times faster, and trust in the veracity of what is being taught is absolute. Is this telling you anything, Roger?"

"Enhanced intelligence?" Roger guessed.

"More than that. Modular intelligence. We're still learning about what can be done. Using a zig-zag series we can lock-in as many as seven people, and the group is like a newly born superbeing. The old oligarchies and leaders have shut themselves out by rushing to be first to have the vaccine and hoard their petty secrets. Now they're fighting for control, but who do you think will win?"

There was little doubt of the answer. Carolyn went on to say that a massive propaganda campaign was to be part of the impending global civil war. Ultras with experience in mass public-awareness campaigns were in high demand for the strategic planning units. Roger was just such an ultra.

As they drove through the night a single word kept returning to Roger. Why? Why had a species of telepathic, stone-age hunters been genetically modified to become more primitive? Perhaps to force the humanoids of the Middle Pleistocene to evolve into vastly more mentally powerful individuals. Again, why? A viral switch

had been left, designed to break humans' individual isolation a few centuries after industrialization. Why?

Perhaps humans were a time bomb, secretly configured by some rogue faction of unimaginable beings to develop brains of grossly enhanced capacity in isolation. Roger could not imagine himself as part of some super-intelligent horde, boiling out of the solar system to shatter the peace of some venerable galactic civilization, yet...

Carolyn sat beside him, faint scintillations dancing across her face in the streetlights, and the dark, deadly T-shape in her lap. In half a day she had been trained to take on elite, professional killers and win. What would he be like after half a day of group lock-in? What would ultras achieve in a year? In ten? Through the scattered cloud and city's glare the brighter stars were twinkling and gleaming, and to Roger they suddenly seemed very much closer.

Sean McMullen's previous stories in *Interzone* include "A Ring of Green Fire" (issue 89), "Slow Famine" (issue 107) and "New Words of Power" (issue 146). He lives in Melbourne, and over the past few years he has developed into one of the star names of Australian sf, with several novels published.

interzone

The leading British magazine that specializes in SF and new fantastic writing. Among many other writers, we have published

**BRIAN ALDISS RAMSEY CAMPBELL GARRY KILWORTH
JOHN SLADEK J.G. BALLARD RICHARD COWPER
DAVID LANGFORD BRIAN STABLEFORD
IAIN BANKS JOHN CROWLEY MICHAEL MOORCOCK
BRUCE STERLING BARRINGTON BAYLEY
THOMAS M. DISCH RACHEL POLLACK LISA TUTTLE
GREGORY BENFORD MARY GENTLE KEITH ROBERTS
IAN WATSON MICHAEL BISHOP WILLIAM GIBSON
GEOFF RYMAN CHERRY WILDER DAVID BRIN
M. JOHN HARRISON BOB SHAW GENE WOLFE**

interzone has introduced many excellent new writers, and illustrations, articles, interviews, film and book reviews, news, etc.

interzone is available from specialist bookshops, or by subscription.

- ☐ For six issues, send £18 (outside UK, £21, USA \$32).
☐ For twelve issues, send £34 (outside UK, £40, USA \$60)
Single copies: £3.50 inc. p&dp (outside UK, £4, USA, \$6)
Outside Europe, all copies are despatched by accelerated surface mail.

To: **interzone** 217 Preston Drive, Brighton, BN1 6FL, UK

Name
Address
<small>If candidate's address is different from the above, please include it on a separate sheet</small>

Please send me six/twelve issues of *Interzone*, beginning with the current issue.

I enclose a cheque/p.o./
international money order for the sum of
made payable to *Interzone*
(delete as applicable)

OR please charge my MasterCard/Visa:

Card number	Signature
<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>
Expiry date	
<input type="text"/>	

If you'd rather not cut up your magazine, feel free to photocopy this form, or even write the salient information on a separate sheet of paper

I died in my sleep.

There wasn't anything special about my death. I hardly even noticed it. I dreamed I was walking down a long hallway closely lined with doors on both sides. The end of the corridor was invisible in the distance, and I was alone. On the wall next to each door hung a framed portrait, slightly larger than life, and lit from above by a lamp.

I looked at the paintings as I passed by them. What else could I do? Only the portraits disturbed the endless monotony of the corridor. There seemed to be male and female portraits in approximately equal numbers, but randomly distributed. The people were mostly of advanced age, and some were very old indeed, but here and there was a younger face, or even a child, though these were quite rare. The images were formal studio-portraits, and the people were all elaborately, even ceremonially dressed. They looked conscious of their own importance, and that of the occasion. Most of them were smiling, but some faces were simply not suited to smiling. They looked grimly serious.

I was not overly surprised when I finally saw my own portrait next to one of the doors. I hadn't actually expected it, but it didn't seem out of place. After all, if so many others had their portraits hanging there, why shouldn't I? Where else can one hope for a privileged position if not in one's own dream? The only thing that momentarily confused me was that I could not remember when the portrait had been painted. I must have posed for it, I supposed. But maybe that hadn't been necessary. It's hard to say. I don't pretend to understand much about portrait-painting.

Regardless of its origin, I liked the portrait. It did me full justice – more, it showed me in exceptional form. Although I was depicted at my current age, the painter had skilfully diminished some of the more unpleasant aspects of aging: he had slightly smoothed the wrinkles on my forehead and around my eyes, tightened my double chin, removed the yellowness and blotches from my cheeks, darkened some of the gray streaks in my hair. This was not to make me look younger. The years were still on the painting, but I bore them with greater élan. And most important of all, there was no sign of the debilitating disease that had taken such heavy toll of my looks. No effort on the part of a photographer could ever have produced the same effect, however great his skill.

I stood in front of my portrait for a long time, gazing in satisfaction. But all things have their measure, even vanity. I couldn't stand there forever. Someone might pass by sooner or later and find me in this unbecoming position, which would certainly be embarrassing. But where could I go? Continue down the corridor? That did not seem promising; it appeared to extend endlessly before me, with no destination to make for.

Should I go back? That possibility hadn't crossed my mind before. I turned around and immediately understood I could not count on going back. Just a few steps behind me the hallway disappeared, turning into deep darkness, as though all the lamps above the paintings had turned off as soon as I passed them. Maybe the lights would go on again if I headed in that direction, but I had no desire to find out.

The Window

Zoran Zivkovic

I turned around facing forward again – and suffered a new surprise. The same thing had happened to the corridor in front of me. It had turned into a dark tunnel that began at the edge of the small, conical beam of light illuminating my portrait from above. This sole remaining source of light covered the painting, the door beside it and myself in front of it – a tiny island of existence bounded by an opaque, black sea of nothingness.

I had lost the right to choose; there was only one path before me. The moment I touched the doorknob, I was overcome by the feeling that something important was about to happen, but I had no immediate inkling of what it could be. It was only after I opened the door and entered the room that I realized I had died. It happened in the middle of raising and lowering my foot as I crossed the threshold. I was still alive when I started the step outside, and already dead when I finished it inside. I

barely felt the transition itself. Something streamed through me, a wave resembling a light trembling or momentary shiver. It lasted a split second, then passed, leaving behind no other trace than the certainty of death.

I was not afraid. Fear of death has meaning before one dies, and not afterward. The only thing I felt was confusion. I naturally knew nothing about this state. How could I, after all? I had not even tried to picture it in my mind. That had always seemed a pointless exercise to me, and as the disease got the upper hand, such thoughts had come to fill me with revulsion – to be avoided as much as possible.

First of all, I wondered if I was still asleep. It is said that the deceased rest in eternal peace, but that is probably a metaphor, not meant to be taken literally. In any case, the sight before me did not resemble in the least any that I had seen in my dreams. There was nothing unreal or strange. On the contrary. The room I entered was some sort of study, elegantly furnished to be sure, but otherwise not the least bit unusual. There was no one inside. Feeling a bit uncomfortable, I started to inspect it, without stepping away from the door, which I had closed behind me.

To my right stood a large, black, wooden desk. A lamp with an arching neck and green shade illuminated numerous objects, arranged in an orderly fashion upon it: a wide, leather-bound desk-pad; a decorative brass inkwell with a heavy maple-wood blotter; a rose-wood cube, drilled with holes to make a pen and pencil holder; a shallow lacquer paper tray; an ivory-handled magnifying glass; a double silver candlestick (without any candles); three identical little boxes covered in dark velour whose purpose I could not make out; a white flowerpot containing a flowerless plant with long, thin leaves; an engraved pipe stand with three pipes of different shapes.

Across from the desk, on the left side, were two large brown leather armchairs with a small, round coffee table between them. On the table was a lamp with a tasselled yellow shade and an oval tray containing a lidded jug of water and two glasses placed upside down on round paper coasters. Behind the armchairs rose shelves full of books that covered the entire wall. The volumes were of uniform height and thickness, and their spines were bound in a limited range of sombre tones. A vertical ladder rose along the edge of the shelves, its ends firmly anchored to guide-rails on the floor and ceiling.

The middle of the wall facing the door was covered by a large painting in a simple rectangular frame, shorter side down, brightly illumined from below. It depicted an area of clear, blue sky seen through a double window. The deep blue was portrayed so convincingly that for a moment I even took it for a real window.

The window was closed, but there was a certain tension in the otherwise tranquil scene that indicated it might open at any moment – through a draft, perhaps, or by someone going up to open it, someone who was still not visible, but whose presence was hinted at by a shadow that flickered just inside the frame. The only thing that disturbed the harmony of the straight lines

and uniform shades was a colourful butterfly that had already tired from its efforts to fly outside, clearly unable to understand the existence of a completely invisible, but still impenetrable obstacle such as glass.

To the right of the picture, in the semi-darkness, stood a grandfather clock in a tall mahogany case. The glass door was decorated with geometric designs in the corners, and a disproportionately small key protruded from the keyhole. At first I thought I saw only one hand pointing straight up, but when I had a better look I discerned the small hand hidden under the big one. I stared at them for some time, but when they failed to change position I lowered my eyes suspiciously; only then did I notice that the pendulum was resting in the middle, motionless.

To the left of the painting, hard by the bookshelves, was another door. It was the same colour as the wall around it and could only be distinguished by its edges, that appeared somewhat darker. It had an unusual characteristic that I did not notice at first glance. There was a lock, but no doorknob. If the door could be opened, then it was only possible from the other side.

Just as I was looking at it, that happened, quite without sound. Part of the wall seemed simply to arch forward, and a figure appeared in the emptiness left behind. I stared at it fixedly. Had I not been dead, I am sure that my heart would have jumped, and pins and needles would have run up and down my spine.

The man who appeared in front of me seemed unassuming, almost like a clerk: in late middle age, not very tall, balding, with a thick, narrow moustache that covered only the line under his nose, small, round, wire-rimmed glasses, and wearing a dark suit of classic cut that did not quite succeed in hiding his extra pounds. The smile that appeared on his round, ruddy face seemed guileless and unaffected.

He hastened brightly to greet me, his hand stretched out. I had no recourse but to accept it.

“Welcome! Welcome!”

I didn’t know what to say in return, so I smiled too, although mine was somewhat forced. We stood there like that for some time, gripping each other’s hands, eyeing each other curiously, like friends meeting after a long separation.

He was the first to break the silence. “Please, make yourself comfortable.” He indicated one of the armchairs in front of the bookshelves, waited for me to sit down, and then sat down in the other, hitching up his trouser legs a bit. He was still smiling.

“I was expecting you earlier. You stayed a bit longer than planned.”

His voice seemed to contain a touch of reproach, but that might have been my imagination. He looked at me in silence for several moments, perhaps expecting me to say something. As I remained silent, he finally waved his hand dismissively.

“Well, it’s all the same. Some are late, some are early. There are very few who arrive on time. They all come, however, sooner or later. How do you feel?”

I cleared my throat before answering uncertainly.

"Fine, I think."

He nodded his head in satisfaction. "Nothing is bothering you, there is no discomfort?"

I paused briefly. "No, everything's all right."

The man's smile broadened. "I'm glad to hear that. You're just a bit confused, right?"

"Yes," I admitted after a moment's hesitation, "a little."

"You mustn't reproach yourself for that. You're no exception in this regard. They're all confused when they arrive. It's quite normal. Would you like a glass of water?" He indicated the jug on the table between us.

"No, thank you," I replied. I had the ghostly impression that my throat was dry, but somehow it didn't seem appropriate to drink water in this new position. Maybe later, when I got used to it.

"People are really quite full of questions," continued the man. "They are dying of curiosity. I'm sure that you are, too."

There was no reason to pretend. "I hope that's normal, too."

"Of course, of course. You are certainly interested in where you have arrived, what awaits you here, and who I am, as well."

"Certainly," I agreed in a faltering voice.

"There is a little difficulty in this connection. I, naturally, can answer all these questions. And many others that you might like to ask. But if I do that, I will deprive you of the possibility of going back."

"Going back?"

"Yes. You can return. To life."

I stared fixedly at the stranger in the other armchair. His tiny eyes returned my glance good-naturedly through his round glasses.

"But I'm dead," I said finally, in a half-questioning voice.

"Yes, that's clear. Otherwise you wouldn't be here."

"Well, then, how..."

"I can't explain it to you. Unless you decide to stay."

Now my throat felt not only dry, but tight. I tried to swallow, without success. As I poured water from the jug into one of the glasses, my hand trembled a bit. I hoped this clumsiness had not been too conspicuous. The water was cold, but it tasted a little stale.

"Do you mean to say I'm the one who decides – whether I go back or stay?"

"You, of course. Who else?"

"I mean, it doesn't depend on my behaviour in... my previous life? I might be someone really bad, for example."

The man gave a short laugh. "Yes, you could. But it makes no difference. There is no punishment or reward here. This is not the Last Judgment."

"So, it's enough for me to decide to go back. Do I understand that correctly?"

"You understand correctly. You can even choose the shape in which you will return."

I put the glass back on the coaster. Several drops that had spilled from the jug sparkled in the yellow light on the silver surface of the tray.

"I wouldn't change my shape. I'm used to this one."

The smile disappeared from the man's lips. "I'm afraid that's the only thing that's impossible. Your old shape has been used up, it is no longer serviceable. You can't go back to it. And it would not be wise. Disease has completely destroyed you, isn't that so? But you can choose something completely new. The choice is almost unlimited."

"Be someone else?"

"You would not be someone else, because you would have no memory of your earlier life. It would be a new beginning for you."

"I would be born again?"

"Most assuredly. You would return to the world as a newborn child, as is fitting. To live a new life. With the characteristics that you want."

"You mean, I can choose what I'll look like, or how tall I'll be?"

"And much more than that. You could change the colour of your skin, your sex..."

"Sex?"

The look of amazement that appeared on my face caused the stranger to smile once again. "That is one of the most frequent changes. In both directions. I think it's not so much dissatisfaction with one's original sex as much as curiosity about trying the opposite sex."

I shook my head. "Well, I'm not curious."

"I understand. Would you perhaps be interested in going back as something other than a human being? That is also possible."

I squinted my eyes in disbelief. "What do you mean?"

"There are other forms of life on earth besides humans. There are countless numbers, in fact. They are all at your disposal."

"What, for example?"

"Oh, anything. Of course, it all depends on the inclinations of the one going back. People usually choose an animal."

I paused a bit before answering. "Why would someone want to be an animal, and not a human, in his new life?"

"Well, it doesn't have to be at all as bad, as you might think. The life of a pure-bred cat or thoroughbred horse, for example, could be much more comfortable and care-free than many human lives. And if you prefer excitement, there are few human experiences that can compare to what a lion, an eagle or a shark experiences every day."

I thought it over briefly. "I still don't think I want to be an animal."

"Whatever you want. There are other possibilities as well. You could be a plant."

"A plant?"

"Yes, that is not such a rare choice."

"But plants don't have any... any consciousness."

"That's true, but this drawback is compensated by other advantages. A long life, for example. Almost every type of tree lives considerably longer than a man. Sequoias are highly valued in this regard. Also, they are protected, which makes them additionally attractive. But even short-lived flowers have their admirers. People sometime decide to go back as an orchid or a rose-blossom, even though they know they will only live one short season."

"But that's absurd. Getting the chance for a new life

and wasting it on some flower..."

"They don't look at it like that. Beauty means everything to them. That is something we must accept. But there are truly some decisions that are hard to understand. Even for me. What would you say to going back as a salamander, a worm, as a sagebrush, a stinging-nettle or a spider?"

"A spider?" I repeated. My face twisted into a disgusted grimace.

"Yes, quite unpleasant, wouldn't you say?"

"I would not change at all," I rushed to say, shaking my head. "I would like to stay as similar as possible to myself in my previous life. If that's possible."

"Of course it is. The great majority choose just that. So this means you have decided to go back?"

I did not answer at once. A multitude of confusing questions swarmed inside me. Finally, one outweighed all the others. "If I returned, I would live out another lifetime, right?"

"Yes."

"And in the end I would die again?"

"That is inevitable, unfortunately."

"After that would I... come back here again?"

"No, you only come here once. After your second life all that remains is death. You are given no further choice."

He said this with an even voice, as though it were something banal. I looked at him for a few moments without talking.

"But what is that choice all about, anyway? On one side there is a new life. I understand that. But what's on the other side? What am I supposed to choose between?"

The stranger removed his glasses, took a large white handkerchief from the inside pocket of his jacket and started to wipe them. He did it patiently and with extreme care, and in the end lifted them against the table-lamp to check them. Without them his face seemed somehow bare. He put them back on slowly, pressing them onto the bridge of his nose.

"They rarely get around to that question," he said at last. "Almost all of them immediately grab the chance to return. They're not interested in anything else."

"What do you say to the others?"

"Nothing specific. The most I can do is give them a hint. Anything more than that would endanger their return, if they decided to go back after all."

"A hint?"

"Yes," replied the man. "Please come with me."

He got up, waited for me to do the same, and then took me cordially by the arm and led me. At first I thought we were heading for the door through which he had entered, but we stopped in front of the large picture in the middle of the wall.

His voice dropped almost to a whisper. "Look at it carefully."

My eyes were filled with the sight of the blue heavens seen through the closed window. The moments passed by slowly. Nothing happened. When the change finally happened, it first affected my sense of hearing and not my sight. Suddenly, as though from a great distance, I

started to hear an even, steady drumming. I didn't recognize it at first. It was only when it got louder in the surrounding silence that I realized it was the dull ticking of the clock. I did not need to turn my eyes towards the large mahogany case in the right corner to know that the pendulum was no longer motionless.

As though in answer to this awakening sound, the picture came to life. The butterfly fluttered once, sluggishly, without the hope of finally breaking out, and slid down a bit lower. The shadow moved because the hand outside the frame moved. The hand entered the frame and made for the middle of the window. It tried to beat its own shadow, but they reached the handle at the same time and turned it.

The moment the window opened, I was almost stunned by a rush of dizziness. The man's firm clasp on my arm was a welcome support without which I would have lost my balance and fallen. But the butterfly had no one to help it. The gust of wind easily whisked it off the smooth glass surface and sent it rushing into the blue infinity.

That very instant everything disappeared: the picture frame, the wall, the stranger, the entire study. I was in the middle of nothing and started to fall. I knew that I had to move my wings, that I was supposed to fly, and not sink headlong, but I suddenly no longer knew how. Many flashes of an eternity filled with icy horror passed before I once again mastered this simple, instinctive skill. First my sinking slowed down, then stopped, and when I finally started to climb on an ascending stream of air, I didn't have to move my wings at all. I just kept them spread out like two enormous, colourful twin sails in the middle of the vast open sea of air that surrounded me.

Fear turned into the rapture that always accompanies flying. I could have stayed there forever, surrendering to this tide of joy. Then, at an unspecified distance ahead of me, I caught sight of something wrinkled on the uniform fabric of blue. Something had started to thin the air, dissolve it, something that appeared from underneath. It was bright, radiant, inviting. I flapped my wings energetically, wrenching myself away from the main airstream. The call that drew me, the radiance coming from the other side of the firmament, was irresistible: the flame of a candle attracting a moth in the dark.

But I was not allowed to reach the light. The airstream suddenly changed direction. I tried to resist it feverishly, realizing in despair that I was being borne away from where I longed to go. The strength of my wings, however, was nothing compared to that powerful pull. I rushed backwards faster and faster, filled with a painful feeling of futility and helplessness. The window slammed shut after me when I flew back in, and the same moment I was swallowed up in darkness.

The darkness was not completely empty; it was filled with the beating of a colossal heart. It was a regular, uniform sound, but somehow I knew it would soon stop. That happened all at once, without any premonitory slowing. Dropping to the lowest point, the pendulum did not continue on the other side; it stopped there, having nothing else to measure. In the silence it left behind, my sight slowly returned.

I was still standing in front of the picture, staring at it, although there was no longer anything moving in it. The butterfly was drooping in one of the corners again, and the shadow was patiently waiting for the unseen hand to move. Another hand slightly increased its pressure around my arm.

"This way. You'll feel more comfortable if you sit down again."

I wanted to tell him that everything was all right with me, but I staggered at the very first step and was grateful for the support he offered. When we were settled in the armchairs, he poured some more water from the jug into my glass. I wasn't thirsty, but I still took a long drink.

The man did not speak right away, just watched me with his customary grin. He was clearly giving me the chance to collect my wits. And I was grateful for that, too.

"An exceptional painting, wouldn't you agree?" he said at last.

"Yes," I agreed after a brief hesitation, a little hoarse. "Exceptional."

We stopped talking once again. Just then a thought crossed my mind, one completely inappropriate to the decisive moment at hand. The other glass was still turned upside-down on the tray, unused. I wondered if it was there incidentally, just like the multitude of other objects in the room, or if the stranger sometimes drank a little water from it.

"So? Have you chosen?" There was no impatience in his voice, and I felt under no pressure. He could have asked me something quite trivial in the same tone.

"A butterfly," I replied softly. "I would like to be a butterfly, of course."

He looked at me wordlessly several moments, and then gave a brief nod. "Of course." His smile grew broader. He indicated the door with his hand. "After you."

I got up, a little unsteady, and headed in that direction, but stopped after a few steps, confused. The door had no a handle on this side. How could I open it? I thought about turning around and asking the man. But that very instant I realized there was no need, for there was no longer any door in front of me.

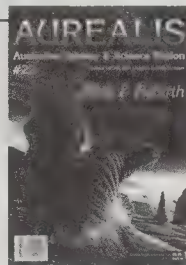
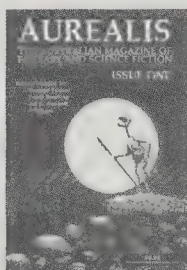
Copyright © Zoran Zivkovic, 2000

Translated from the Serbian by Alice Copple-Tosic;
translation edited by Chris Gilmore

Zoran Zivkovic's previous story for this magazine was "The Astronomer" (Interzone 144) – which is due to reappear imminently in the English-language version of his four-part novel *Time Gifts* (Northwestern University Press, USA, Spring 2000). Zoran and his family continue to live in their home city of Belgrade, Yugoslavia, where life is not easy at present.

"Aurealis is the flagship of
Australian science fiction."

*The Encyclopaedia of Australian
Science Fiction & Fantasy*



"Every issue manages to deliver something special."

The Australian



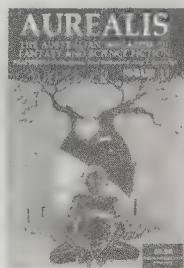
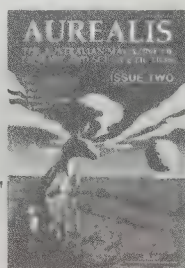
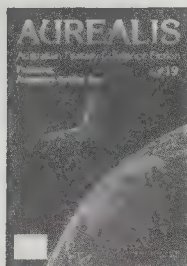
AUREALIS

Australian Fantasy & Science Fiction

*is Australia's only professional SF magazine
and has been described as Australia's Interzone.*

"... attractive, professional looking...
with strong illustrations and a
readable design, not to mention a
solid track record consistent
publishing, good stories and
notable authors."

Tangent



"... easily matches the quality of the US prozines."
SF Chronicle

"Aurealis... proves that Australia has
much to offer the global SF community."

BBR

4-issue subscriptions for British readers are A\$38 (seamail) & A\$46 (airmail).

Please make out cheque or credit card orders to Chimaera Publications, PO Box 2164 Mt Waverley, VIC 3149, Australia. Web-site: www.aurealis.hi.net

My mole at the World Fantasy Convention in Providence, Rhode Island, reported an all-time bad idea for table prizes at the awards banquet (see previous column for winners). The centrepiece of each table was a bowl containing a Siamese Fighting Fish, whose unlucky winner had either to abandon this glittering prize or carry it hundreds or thousands of miles home, with unfortunate consequences of fish mortality. "They might as well have put a live puppy on the table," cried one excitable agent. With all those horror authors present, one is amazed that some fish weren't persuaded to share a bowl in hope of an interesting bread-and-circuses spectacle...

COSMIC CAROUSEL

Stephen Baxter was bemused to hear two implausible rumours about himself: that he has a terrible phobia about signing sessions, and that he's married to a former Dr Who assistant. Where do these things start? "Maybe there are alien beings who make them up, like the jokes in that old story of Asimov's."

Howard Browne (1908-1999), author and 1940s managing editor of *Amazing Stories* and *Fantastic Adventures*, died on 28 October.

Quentin Crisp (1908-1999), aphorist, performer, and famous in his own words as a stately homo of England, died unexpectedly in Manchester on 21 November; he was 90. His contribution to fantastic literature was the determinedly horrid Gothic fable *Chog* (1979).

Ellen Datlow suspended her acclaimed web magazine *Event Horizon: SF, Fantasy, Horror* in December, placing it "on indefinite hiatus." Critics' and readers' enthusiasm, alas, doesn't pay the bills; a rich investor or buyer is sought.

A.A. Gill's novel *Star-Crossed* won the *Literary Review* Bad Sex Prize for "the year's literary novel with the worst, most redundant or embarrassing description of the sexual act." I can't face actually reading *Star-Crossed*, but it's evidently sf: "The scene involving a deep-sea diver and a genetically-modified, homosexually-inclined giant squid has to be read to be believed," wrote the *Daily Mirror*.

Charles D. Hornig (1916-1999), who on the strength of a 1933 fanzine editorial took over Hugo Gernsback's *Wonder Stories* at age 17 and went on to edit other pulps, died on 11 October.

Clarissa Luard (1948-1999), formerly Clarissa Rushdie (she was once married to Salman Rushdie), died in November after a sudden recurrence of cancer. She was only 50. As Literature Officer for the Arts Council, she'd

ANSIBLE LINK



DAVID LANGFORD

been responsible for their dealings with *Interzone* over several years ("always very simpatico" – David Pringle). Clarissa previously worked at A.P. Watt as literary agent for several sf authors, including myself.

Ken MacLeod was applauded for his off-the-cuff definition during a convention panel: "Science fiction is the blood that flows at the cutting edge of science!"

Michael Moorcock, who turned 60 on 16 December, was furious that a November *Guardian* sf supplement (actually a promotion funded by HarperCollins) was packaged as a digest-sized magazine called... *New Worlds*.

Brian Stableford (late news) won the SF Research Association's Pilgrim Award for sf scholarship last June, but was too modest to tell me.

INFINITELY IMPROBABLE

Publishers and Sinners. Virgin commissioning editor James Marriott announced in late November that "the Virgin Worlds imprint has been in limbo while we assessed the sales reaction to the launch titles. Unfortunately this reaction has been less enthusiastic than we'd hoped, and we will not be commissioning any more titles for the foreseeable future." For those who wondered why VW began with three unknown authors and no obvious lead title, *Ian Watson* can reveal this wasn't the editor's idea: "Virgin had been hanging on to a copy of my newest novel *Mockymen*, which perceptive Peter Darvill-Evans, now departed, wished to buy over a year ago as the lead title for the launch. He was on the point of sending me a contract when the sales force told him, to his surprise, 'You already have three titles; you can't have another one till

we know how those ones go.' Now they know; they went to their doom."

As Others See Us. *New York* magazine ran a "50 Ways to Meet Your Lover" feature, whose fourth option was: "Meet A Mate At A Science-Fiction-Fan Convention?" The claimed benefits are that "in exchange for listening to some Kirk-vs.-Picard drivel now and then, you'll beam up a partner who will be pathetically grateful for every bit of attention you give him; won't be spending money on Prada anything; and is unlikely to cheat on you, unless you count Jedi mind tricks. Besides, those computer-programmer types are privy to those three magic words: Microsoft stock options." If only.

Feedback. Paul Simpson of *DreamWatch* magazine reports that the contributing editor who concocted a spurious Greg Egan interview (see *IZ* 151) has shamefacedly resigned.

Thog's Critical Masterclass. *D.H. Lawrence* on "The Fall of the House of Usher" by Edgar Allan Poe: "The exquisitely sensitive Roger [sic], vibrating without resistance with his sister Madeline, more and more exquisitely, and gradually devouring her, sucking her life like a vampire in his anguish of extreme love. And she asking to be sucked."

Small Press. *The Small Press Guide 2000* devotes a page to each of 365 publications/presses in the UK or having a UK address, with contact details and editorial requirements. 377pp; £9.99 from Writers' Bookshop, Remus House, Coltsfoot Drive, Woodston, Peterborough, PE2 9JX.

Thog's Masterclass. "...then he felt the hand without the black bandage dive like a blind shellfish into the algae of his anxiety." (Gabriel Garcia Marquez, *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, trans Gregory Rabassa 1970) *Dept of Anatomy*: "As the extension of female hips and buttocks declined, leg-o'-mutton sleeves of enormous proportions rose to take their place." (Alexandra Joel, *Parade: The Story of Fashion in Australia*, 1998) *Dept of Historical Weights and Measures (Rome, 44 BC)*: "... feeling somewhat as if he'd been hit hard between the eyes with a two-by-four." (Alice Borchardt, *Night of the Wolf*, 1999) "Captain Vandermeer, if you will please initiate a three-hundred-and-sixty-degree turn of the *Washington*, we'll begin the long journey home." (Anne McCaffrey, *The Tower and the Hive*, 1999) "Static reality had a nasty trick of paying back with a vengeance those who toyed with it with impunity." (Robert Weinberg, *The Road to Hell*, 1997).

MUTANT POPCORN

Nick Lowe

OK, read me that last bit back. No, in Greek, in Greek! Aramaic is a pussy language, a strictly niche market; that's no way to max your prophet. You want the whole world to buy your product, you need to port your code to a global platform. – Hmm, ok. Great bit about the beast; keep that in. I'm starting to wonder about "twenty-nine and a bit" for the number; maybe a regular integer would give better numerological gameplay? Stop bogarting those hallucinogens while I have a think... Wow, this is good stuff. You grow this here on Patmos? You have to give me the name of your herbalist. It really kicks cortex after a three-week fast.

Where was I? OK, OK, I got something... And next, er, and next I saw a vast and costly movie out of the west – what? Um, just write *ergidion kinematographikon*, those in the last days'll know what it means. And it was called **End of Days**, and behold it was the coming again of the star called Arnoldus Sthouarz. Tziouartsen, oh bobbins, just spell him Arnie. And lo he carried within him the heart of a pig, which was a routine procedure in those times, and his career had a bright head and a long tail like a comet; and where it was bright he wielded great might and made films with rather tiresome layers of would-be character, but where it burned less bright he just did what he did best, big guns and daft stunts and jumping free of explosions. And there was much rejoicing among the nations.

And in this movie Satan was abroad in the body of Gabriel Byrne and totally gagging to get laid and thereby in some ill-explained way unlock armageddon, but to do so he had to deflower Robin Tunney in the final hour before midnight on December 28, 1999, Eastern Standard Time. And all that stood against him was Arnoldus, in the body of a dried-out ex-cop now working for an amazingly well-funded private security firm – allowing him to function exactly as a cop but with zero paperwork, unlimited weapons budget, and a millennium-compliant squadroom.

entirely on fruity-coloured iMacs.

(Utterly relentless product placement here from Apple Computer, who also demo a remarkable rollout of killer software including real-time spoken-Akkadian voice recognition with simultaneous English translation, and a program that enables deadline-pressed movie heroes to locate where any vehicle in NYC is parked simply by typing in a licence plate.)

Now, verily there is no higher-concept film genre than the Catholic action fantasy, and *End of Days* has an absolute Leviathan of a time with the tropes of the package. Not content with a core cast of God, Satan, Arnoldus and the Antimadonna, the plot stirs in as thickening agents some wonderfully Pythonesque rival gangs of armed clerics kicking down doors. In particular, NOBODY expects the ancient masonic order of the Knights of the Holy See, a secret Vatican hit-squad bent on taking out the Bride of Satan before the Dark Lord can get his hairy cloven leg over – but whose modus operandi is unfortunately hobbled by their insistence on administering extreme unction before they actually assassinate anyone, giving their victim more than ample time to dodge the blow and kick goofies while our hero shots his way up the

stairs to the rescue. And even these are outclassed by Byrne's Satan, a masterly incarnation of pure movie evil so utterly, Batman-villain inept that he repeatedly pauses pursuit to wreak graphic vengeance on disappointing minions while our heroes make their leisurely getaway. He has the devil's taste in big-screen entertainment, favouring improbably nasty serial murders and absolutely colossal explosions; and women, of course, find him irresistibly shaggable, especially young blonde ones with plunged cleavage. Yet when he finally gets our hero up on a cross where he wants him, he just ties him loosely up and wanders off, rather than twisting his head three times round his neck like he does with every single body else. No wonder the forces of light have had it so easy since the last time.

But then one of the most delightful touches is the meretricious costuming of standard Hollywood-narrative conventions as earnest Catholic theology, with lashings of plot prophecy out of helpfully illustrated scrolls, interspersed with generous commentaries by the Pontiff and/or Fr. Rod Steiger on the Lord's rules of metaphysical engagement. "If we sacrifice the innocent, we do not deserve to be redeemed... You can't prevent evil by doing evil... It takes a person of pure heart to defeat pure evil." And: "The prophecy depends on faith... It is in our darkest hour that we must have faith." Yet how can such promises be fulfilled, when the Bad Guy seems to have all the best set pieces and an inexhaustible supply of stunt doubles? "How," asks the evil Gabriel, "can you expect to defeat me when I am forever?" Nevertheless, those who have faithfully studied the Movie Bible will know in their hearts how the equations must resolve, and that the Riggsy backstory to Arnoldus' motivation is being banked for extra card points come the finale.

For the answer, of course, is in the star, of whose career and screen persona this cheerful *T2* reread is a heartwarming affirmation, as our hero and redeemer discovers he hasn't lost it during his years in the wilderness atoning for Mr Freeze. "It gets easier," purrs the Lord of Darkness at the obligatory Temptation Plot Point, "when you accept what you are: a fallen soul." And it's true that the fallen star's descent from the firmament seems at first to have slightly diminished his powers. Though this is one of those movies where people are for the most part remarkably casual about things like getting shot in the arm at point-blank range by their partners, and not noticeably discomfited by chest impalement on a four-

foot steel blade, there are moments when Arnoldus' traditional invulnerability does falter, to the extent of losing consciousness from a mere shot to the vest, and in one extraordinary scene getting beaten up on by Miriam Margolyes. Yet in the end his divinity comes through for us all, and our saviour descends from the cross to redeem mankind in the final act as the faithful always knew he would.

If you can live with this alarming essay in celebrity autocanonization, it's no end of fun. After the Marcus Nispel affair (untried pop-promo director hand-picked by Arnoldus goes ego-nutzy, self-immolates in daft manifesto leaked to press and sent up hilariously by a waggish Soderbergh), *End of Days* was eventually finished by the ever-professional B-list veteran Peter Hyams, who in the last days has been enjoying an agreeable second coming of his own as an efficient director of high-concept three-star sigma phi thrillers like *Timecop* and *The Relic*. Certainly Hyams makes the most of his unlooked-for command of a \$100m+ budget, delivering what may well be the silliest-ever helicopter stunt chase and the silliest white-knuckle subway-car sequence, only to cap both with a delicious final craneshot where you see the NYPD roll up outside the church with screeching wheels. ("Where were you guys? We just had a 50-foot manifestation of Satan in here, and he totally trashed the place! Happy new year, by the way.") A career high, on the 21st birthday of *Capricorn One*, and I hope it opens a few more doors. A pity he hasn't left a whole lot of room for a sequel.

And I saw a second movie that was exactly like the first, only reshot from the housewife's angle and with the flimsy veneer of theology replaced by a flimsy veneer of space science. And it was called *The Astronaut's Wife*, and had Johnny Depp go up on a shuttle and come back with an evil space spirit inside him, and in a bout of really bad astro-sex inseminate the lovely Charlize Theron, who then spends the movie agonizing about whether termination is ethical if you're carrying the twin spawn of the cosmic Antichrist.

The most interesting question about Rand Ravich's movie is why it's about astronauts at all. A very knowing remake of *Rosemary's Baby*, whose ending especially is kept in mind throughout, its supernatural McGuffin is really no more technologically based than the original's coven of aspirational Satanists; and apart from a very brief spacewalk flashback and some gabbled nonsense from Joe Morton that sounds like a half-remembered synopsis of *Species*, the demon rapist might as well have come up the toilet

bowl. Nevertheless, NASA don't seem to have seen this movie as one to cooperate with, and it's not hard to understand why. Not only does the Agency itself news-manage blunders, cover up the consequences and terminate the whistleblower, but the very status of US astronauts as national icons is coolly deconstructed. You don't actually need the liquid-Predator space demon FX to appreciate the disturbing ease with which every girl's American dream (you're just a grade-school teacher, but you're married to *Johnny Depp!* swoon! – and he's a *national hero* so full of the right stuff you just want to *suck it out of him* with your *perfect lips!*) turns to paranoid Polanski nightmare (trapped in big expensive NY apartment with the devil's seed inside you and everyone else telling you it's just your hormones). And the creepy touch is that nobody else seems able spot the difference between the right stuff and the very, very wrong, as the possessed Depp glides with unresisted ease from American hero to sinister armaments tycoon, and still makes the cover of *Time*.

It's far from a flawless or even terribly coherent film, but as a darker, determinedly feminine take on the devil-spawn theme, it's a refreshing antidote to the laddish shootups and leering gaze of a by-numbers holiday blockbuster, however engaging; and it's one of the very few films to take a jaundiced view of the real interests served by the space industry and its heroes. The prints of an over-prescribing script doctor seem sometimes visible on the one-liners ("Men are like parking spaces: all the good ones are taken and all the available ones are hand-capped"), but Depp's character, in particular, is remarkably well written, and it's just a shame that the concept and plotting aren't quite on the same floor as the dialogue and atmospherics. (I don't want to spoil anything, but there's a point where the characters inexplicably fail to think the word "fusebox".)

OK, that's a take; save and copy... – What do you mean, end of roll? You're not still using that crummy old storage media? Jesus aspirate Christ, that's so last-millennium. Nobody in the Community uses that paper-roll technology these days. You want one of these codex jobs: totally hypertextual, instant access to any passage, high data capacity, so portable you can take it on the road... One day, mark my words, these things will shift in their millions, just as surely as everyone's going to wake up on 01/01/01 thinking everything's normal and Satan never scored, because the Beast's greatest trick will be convincing people its Kingdom hasn't come. Trust me, it's the future.

Nick Lowe

At Bud Light Old Faithful

M. Shayne Bell

I woke everybody early so we could leave West Yellowstone and head into the park before the crowds, but a line of cars and campers was already waiting to get in at 8:00 in the morning. Some schmuck dressed like Ronald McDonald, all gaudy in his clown's costume and wide-rimmed sunglasses, worked the entrance booth taking our money. For just my 4Runner with me, my son Mark, his girls twelve-year-old Kate and eight-year-old Jenny, admission was \$721 – and that included my senior discount and the winter-entrance discount.

Mr McDonald wanted to know if the girls had had some delicious Egg McMuffins for breakfast back in West, which of course they hadn't. I'd fed them better than that out of the coolers I'd packed, but they'd have liked some Egg McMuffins though they were getting to an age where they needed to think about fatty foods and their waistlines. The clown handed the girls scratch-off, take-your-chance coupons for who knows what at the McDonald's concession at Bud Light Old Faithful Lodge, and they hurried to scrape the silver scum from the coupons with their fingernails.

"Grandma, I won a free Coke!" Kate called out.

"I won fries!" Jenny said.

"Use a coin to scrape those things," I said. "Look at your nails."

The girls looked at their nails, then at me. Kate started trying to pick the silver scum out from below her nails. Mr McDonald handed me a map and waved us on. I could not get away from him fast enough. Kate and Jenny unbuckled themselves and climbed into the cargo

hold with the coolers and luggage and waved like mad at the receding clown. In my rearview mirror, I saw him wave back with gusto. "Girls," I said, and I didn't need to say anything else. They climbed back into their seats and buckled up.

I drove straight for the lodge. It was the kind of thing my husband Sam would have done, so I did it that way, too. Since Sam had helped himself out of this world I'd had to do a lot of things like he'd have done them – run the farm with his precision, pay the bills promptly like he'd have paid them, tend to the machinery or at least see that it got tended to so it wouldn't break down when we needed it just like he always had – besides the cooking and canning and cleaning and chickens and gardening that had been my work before. But today I had none of that. Today I wanted the girls to see Old Faithful erupt before tourists overran Geyser Basin later in the day. I'd planned for these days off, timed the driving, woke people up and had breakfast waiting, pitched in with Mark to repack the 4Runner like Sam would have, and made the girls wear their sunglasses. We were going to see Yellowstone right. This trip was going to be something to remember.

We passed five Fuji Film photo pulloffs and stopped at the sixth next to a meadow with buffalo and elk grazing in it, the oldest adults blind or nearly blind of course, the grass mostly brown and dry but some of it green along the stream which must have had a hot spring running into it somewhere. The water steamed in the cold morning air. Mark snapped 20 or 30 exposures on his digital,

then stood in line at the developing kiosk waiting his turn to sort through his snapshots and delete those he didn't want and print out two he thought looked good while I stood watching the traffic pass by heading for Old Faithful and the morning's eruptions. The girls wanted to stop at every hot pool or geyser turnoff there was, but I promised them we'd come back to take a good look later and just kept driving. We didn't stop again till we came to Old Faithful with its billboards and upscale shopping mall and neon signs flashing and blinking and demanding that you spend money.

We parked in the section of the lot sponsored by Kellogg Company, which was easy to remember since if you missed the Corn Flakes billboards you couldn't miss the jingle from their latest ad blitz blaring from loudspeakers at every seventh parking spot. I just sat behind the wheel, staring. I knew congress had let corporate sponsors flood into all the national parks after paying enormous fees to put up billboards and concessions and stores. I knew Anheuser-Busch had outbid Perrier to win the right to sponsor the geysers. What I hadn't taken time to download were pictures of what they'd done here. There isn't a clock tower that marks the most likely time of the next eruption any more, nothing maybe a little dignified and universal like that. What there is now is a row of oversized Bud Light beer bottles attached to motion sensors in the ground and arranged in a row in front of the pole fence that keeps visitors back from the scalding water. As an eruption nears, the sensors pop open bottles on each end and fake beer fizzes onto the ground. The closer an eruption gets, the more bottles open and fizz away till just before the actual eruption when 20 bottles in the middle burst open at once and the geyser erupts. The bottles on either end were already fizzing.

"Something wrong?" Mark asked.

Two more bottles burst open and fizzed away. "Let's hurry!" I said. "It won't be long."

We all got out of the 4Runner, but Kate forgot her camera and I had to go back and unlock the door for her. By then a big crowd had formed, people running from their campers and the lodge, bundled in sweaters and coats and stamping around, cold breath drifting across everybody's faces. I saw Mark and Jenny holding down a spot right up against the pole fence. How they'd gotten that I didn't know, late as we were. I took Kate's hand and hurried her toward them. A fat old man standing next to Mark leaned over the fence and sucked up some of the fake beer fizz, then pulled an awful face and spit and spit. The bottles keep popping open and fizzing away, getting closer to the middle, and the geyser was bubbling like mad, the superheated water rising higher and higher, but maybe only half the people were watching the geyser. The rest were laughing and watching the Bud Light bottles and the fake, fizzy beer. Another Ronald McDonald flounced from the lodge to hand out scratch-off coupons.

"Keep him away from us," I muttered to nobody in particular, not expecting a reply, but Mark looked at me sharply.

"We're here to have a good time, Mama," he said.

"We're here to watch the geyser," I said, and the 20

Bud Light bottles in the middle burst open. Some of the noxious spray inside them spit onto my face. I was wiping it away when Old Faithful erupted 170 feet high – and Ronald McDonald was handing scratch-off coupons to my granddaughters who were turned to look at him, not at the geyser, not at what I'd brought them to see.

The spray from the geyser settled down on all of us. I kept my face turned into it – it's clean, after all. Jenny grabbed hold of my coat sleeve. "I won more fries!" she said.

I didn't answer her. Mark took her coupon. "That's nice, dear," he said. "If we hadn't had to get here so early, we could have gone in for lunch now."

I did not even look at him. They all walked off, and I thought: they won't get far. I've got the keys to the 4Runner.

I followed them, eventually. What else was there to do? Sam sure as hell wouldn't have minded the clowns and the beer bottles most of his life. He'd have laughed and laughed about them.

But not in those last years. He'd have minded, then.

I checked us into our room, and got keys for Mark and me. I couldn't find him or the girls, they were shopping somewhere, so I walked back out to the 4Runner and unloaded the luggage myself onto a Kellogg's tram and rode it back to the lodge and wouldn't let a bellhop help me with the bags, thank you, I was loading them onto a cart myself to save the tip when Mark and the girls came out.

"Why didn't you tell me you were bringing in the luggage?" he said.

"I couldn't find you," I said. The girls each had Cokes and M&Ms. Mark was getting them wired first thing, like always, so they could start screeching and clawing at each other. I let Mark take the cart from there, and we found the elevator and our room. It was a decent room that looked out at the geysers. The windows had blinds you could clamp down to block out the neon reds and yellows from the flashing signs at night. The girls ran around the room and jumped on the beds and rushed onto the balcony and tore open all the little packages of soap.

"Now why did you open those?" I asked them. "We brought our own soap." And we had, I'd packed decent soap for us. I sure wasn't going to use the cheap perfumed crap they give you for soap in hotels, and I didn't think any of them needed to use it, either. Mark didn't say a word. He just grabbed the girls' arms and led them onto the balcony and told them to stay there till he opened the sliding door, which he closed behind them. They stood there staring in through the glass like two cats staring into a fish bowl, so Mark yanked the drapes shut.

"I will not allow you to ruin this trip," Mark said to me.

"What are you talking about?" I said. "I arranged for this trip, I paid for this room, I've put the gas in my own 4Runner which brought you here –"

"Stop picking at the girls. You can pick at me all you want, I can take it like Dad must have had to, but stop picking at them."

When he said that, when he implied that I must have mistreated his father, I wanted to take the lamp on the dresser and smash it over his head. "Your father and I

never argued," I said.

"Well, I have to wonder. The way you've been since he... since —"

"Since he blew out his brains? You know why he did that."

"But what really drove him to it? When you act like you've been acting, you make me wonder."

"Goddamn you!" I said, and I willed the tears back out of my eyes. I would not wipe them away. "I was helping your father learn to read Braille. I was running to bring him things when he asked for them. I was managing the farm like he was telling me to. I was rearranging all the furniture so he wouldn't knock into things and bust them —"

"Lots of people are going UV blind, Mama, and they aren't putting gun barrels into their mouths."

I just turned and took my sunglasses and walked out of that room and down the stairs and through the lobby and onto a trail in pines behind the lodge. The trail was filled with people, and I willed away my tears again and walled off the feelings in my heart and walked with my head down. I considered just driving away — maybe becoming one of those women you read about who disappears only to turn up 15 years later waiting tables in some North Carolina diner. But I couldn't do that to my granddaughters. I knew that. I could sure as hell have done that to Mark.

I was right when I said Sam and I had never argued. We hadn't. Yes, there were times when I'd wanted to let him have it, but I hadn't and neither had he. We'd talked about everything and worked out our problems that way, Sam and me, that was one thing people always said about us: we were always talking to each other, always enjoying our conversations, always intimate that way except for one subject he'd forgotten to mention to me, one decision he'd made without consulting me, one topic he hadn't asked my advice on. He'd never thought through what taking his life might do to the girls or the farm or Mark or me or even Lady, our ten-year-old black Lab. Lady still sniffs at Sam's boots, which I haven't moved from the back door yet, then she looks out toward the barns, maybe runs around to either side of the house, looking, always looking, always hoping that that bastard who hadn't talked to me at the end might be coming home any time now, might be walking up the drive, might be bringing in the mail like he always had every evening when he could see, reaching down to pat Lady's head absently while he looked at the letters and the bills.

I kicked a rock out of the trail, but instead of it going off to the side it ricocheted up the path and almost hit an old man in the leg. He was shuffling along with his wife, but which one held the other up, I couldn't tell. They didn't even turn around to look, and I suddenly thought I can't take another step alone, I've got to hang onto something before I fall, and I looked around but all I saw except for pines at either side of the trail was a bench at the top of a little rise with no one sitting in it, and I thought I can make it that far, I'll sit there for a while, sit there and look at whatever view of Yellowstone it affords, just sit.

But advertisements covered the bench. I could sit my butt on a Wendy's burger or Taco Time tacos or purple,

red, and orange Benneton sweaters and I just kept walking. It's what had killed Sam, after all — all this business, all this desire to take our money, all this fast living that had spoiled the planet, ruined the skies, blinded Sam with UV that came through before we even half believed the ozone layer had collapsed, before we'd accepted that the sky really had fallen, before we'd realized that nobody could work unprotected in the broad daylight any more like Sam had done day in day out ploughing, planting, harvesting, harrowing, fertilizing, ruining his eyes with every trip around the fields in his big, fancy tractors with the CD players and the air conditioning and the windows open to the sky.

I stopped some distance from the bench and looked back at Geyser Basin and the billboards and the neon signs and the trams and thought what are we doing here? The corporate sponsors of this park had blinded us and given us skin cancers and heated the world so that now, in February, this park was open without a sign of snow except on the mountains and this trail was bone dry and we'd driven in from West instead of riding snowmobiles like I'd done once with my mother and father when I was a little girl. I still remembered that trip: all the snow drifted so high the lodge roof barely poked through, smoke from the kitchens curling up from an enormous drift like all the others we'd driven across as if they were icy roads, steam from the hot pools so thick it was like a fog.

And I saw Mark making his way up the trail towards me. I felt weak again at the sight of him. I couldn't move from where I stood. I had to wait there for him to come to me. We'd apologize and maybe hug but go on with this trip, I thought, me at least trying to ignore the billboards and concessions.

"Take this," he said when he'd reached me. He handed me a wad of money. "I know you paid for the room and the gas and the food so far. I'm sorry child support and alimony takes most of what I have for now. I told you I was going to pay you back, but just take this now."

I let him go on like that, his money in my hands, it was what he'd brought to spend on the girls. "I can't take your money," I said.

But he turned and headed back down the trail. I caught up to him and shoved the money in his shirt pocket. "I don't want your money," I said.

"What is it you want, then?" and he tried to shove the money in my hands again, but when I wouldn't take it he threw it on the ground and walked off. I picked it up — it was a lot of money, maybe 3,000 dollars — and people were staring. Nobody helped me. I didn't see Mark again till I got to the room.

"I want to take the girls to see the falls," he said, and I was sure they'd have gone without me if I hadn't kept the keys.

"You take this money!" I said, and he took it and threw it on my bed. The girls just stood there wide-eyed. I helped them put on sunscreen and I polished their sunglasses and we set off for Yellowstone Falls. I drove again, but before we'd even left the parking lot I remembered that the lodge would send a maid in to turn down our beds and thought

she'd take the money lying on top of mine, maybe assume it was a tip, so I turned around and pulled up right in front of the front doors of the lodge and stopped.

"You go get that money and put it in a safe place," I told Mark, and I explained about the maid. "We're sitting here till you take care of it."

He slammed the door behind him and was back sooner than I could have imagined, before anybody had even asked me to move the 4Runner. He climbed in and put the money in the jockey box and slammed it shut and buckled himself in. I started driving. I should have strangled him as a baby in his crib, I thought, rather than change his filthy diapers and have him grow up to treat me like he was doing now.

Mark turned on the radio so we could listen to little music and lots of advertising while I drove us east to Yellowstone Lake and the road to the falls that hugs it. Between the Nautica and the Microsoft and the Coke billboards and the concessions and the fast-food turnoffs, we sometimes caught glimpses of the lake shimmering in the winter sun and the snowcapped mountains east. The road was so congested it took me the better part of three hours to drive us to Upper Yellowstone Falls. The parking lots were crowded but I caught sight of a camper getting ready to back up, so I put on the blinkers and we waited and took that spot and started down the stairs over the canyon edge to the best overlook of the falls, the one I remembered coming to with Sam and Mark when he was a little boy. What a happy hot summer day that had been. Mark had run ahead down the stairs, anxious to see the falls we'd heard roaring nearby, and Sam had taken my hand and we'd followed along slowly, not really looking at each other, just holding hands and walking close to each other and smelling the pines. Now there were ads up and down the railing every few feet, and ads covered every bench, and there were signs telling you that a kiosk for printing your snapshots was conveniently just ahead down at the overlook, and I took hold of the railing and stopped. Mark looked back. The spray from the falls was misting up through the canyon. The railing was wet with it, cold, but I held on anyway. "The falls are still there," he said. He knew what I was thinking.

"Are they?" I said. "Are they really any more?"

He just turned and walked on down, the girls behind him. I knew he'd keep an eye on them. Besides, the chicken wire at the overlook wouldn't let them fall through. I turned and made my way back up to the 4Runner. I put in an old CD Sam had bought me of love themes from the classics, and I sat there with that music and my memories of how this place and our lives had once been. The girls complained right away about the music when they got back to the car. Mark didn't ask permission. He just took out the CD and turned the radio back on. I didn't say a word. I just drove us to the lodge where we went up to our room to get ready for dinner.

I took out the girls' nice dresses, which I'd pressed before we'd left. They weren't too wrinkled now. I hurried into the bathroom to put on a nice dress of my own, the navy-blue silk Sam had given me for Christmas two years before. I thought I'd even wear my pearls. I wanted

us to look nice when we went down for supper in the fancy lodge restaurant. "Your turn, girls," I said when I came out, but they didn't move.

"The girls want to eat at McDonald's," Mark said.

"I called ahead for restaurant reservations five months ago," I said. "We can eat at McDonald's any day of the week back home."

"But I won free Cokes," Kate said.

"And I won fries," Jenny said.

"Why don't you save your coupons for lunch tomorrow?" I said.

"The girls asked to go to McDonald's tonight, and I said I'd take them," Mark said. "You can come with us or you can go eat by yourself in that 200-dollar-a-plate restaurant you made reservations in."

"I want to give the girls something to remember," I said. "What will be memorable about eating at McDonald's?"

"Maybe going there and having fun?" Mark said. "Maybe going there with somebody who isn't so bitter she thinks every ad is somehow connected to Dad's death?"

"Girls," I said. "Go wash your hands."

They did that, then they walked onto the balcony and sat in chairs there.

I sat down on my bed. "Yes, I'm bitter," I said to Mark. "And yes, I suppose that makes me hard to be around. If you're ever interested in hearing my list of reasons for becoming this way, make sure you've got a few hours – but right now I'll tell you just one item on that list. I remember a lovely world. Working in it was what your father and I wanted. You knew it as a boy but have forgotten it. Those girls of yours will never know it, and that breaks my heart."

He didn't listen to me. He didn't grant me any understanding. "Well, you could be a little nicer," was all he said.

I just stood and walked onto the balcony. I smiled at my granddaughters, and they smiled back right away – young, still young enough to forgive an old woman if she smiled at them. They were holding their scratch-off coupons. Jenny still had one to scratch off. She needed a coin, I imagined. I didn't stand there like some old fool hurting in ways they'd never understand. I sat down with them and handed Jenny a nickel and pretended to be interested while she scratched away.

"More fries!" she exclaimed.

"I only got drinks," Kate said.

"I'll buy you some fries, too, dear," I said.

She brightened at that. "Do you think we can super-size them?"

"I'm sure we can," I said.

I took their hands and led them inside. I changed back into my jeans, and we all went downstairs to buy burgers and super-sized fries and drinks.

M. Shayne Bell, who lives in Salt Lake City, Utah, has had numerous stories published in American magazines and books since winning a Writers of the Future contest in 1987 – they include sales to *Amazing*, *Asimov's*, *F&SF*, *Realms of Fantasy* and the highly-praised anthology *Starlight 2*.

All down the long days of summer's end, I listened to the dead. They began to speak to me one night, when the warm wind tasted of salt and petrol fumes from the refineries along the Clyde estuary. It was the hottest August I had ever known, or perhaps it was just the fever. My mother said I was sick, and stroked my long hair back from my face and called me her Sylvie, her little girl, but I don't remember the illness so much as the voices which whispered from the dark. They grew loudest towards dawn when, perhaps, the light of the sun reminded them of what they had lost, and with its rising they grew silent.

That day seemed to pass with anguished slowness: the heavy sunlight dragging itself over the sill and each drop of sweat as hot as blood. In the night, the voices returned.

I don't know if they realized I was listening. I was only a child then, and I did not understand the languages of the world beyond the world. I did not realize that a soul does not speak with a single voice but with many, at the same time. It is as though they carry their voices with them from life to life, so that when they speak it is like listening to the static of a radio badly tuned to a station that is no longer there. Maybe the dead grow tired of hearing themselves, and become lost in static and sound.

But gradually, as the year grew on and grew colder, and still I did not get well, I found that by degrees I could understand what the dead were saying.

"...used to take the apples down to the press and he'd catch a rat and drop it in the barrel like seasoning..."

"...followed her down the road from the kirk, but she never once turned her head and I..."

"...hated him even as he lay dying and he never knew..."

The voices scratched away at the air and the shadows; memories caught in time like flies in amber as the dead sipped away at the edges of life. I struggled up in bed and lay against the pillows, listening avidly as they spoke. I don't know why I wasn't more afraid; it must have been the illness.

I remember thinking that it would be a wonderful thing to be able to speak to the dead, and have them listen to me in turn. My mother had four more children to care for, and though she used to sit with me, she still had a hurried air, as though she was just pausing between tasks.

Farm life is hard: quotas to be met and subsidy forms to fill in, as well as the work in the field. My brothers and sisters were at school during the day. And when it became clear that I might in fact die, they did not visit me quite so often. It was as though they were practising for the day when I would no longer be there, or as though they feared a reminder of what might happen to them. Sickness may be avoided, but death is catching, or so it seemed to me. So I did not fear the dead, and to my young mind it seemed a good idea to make friends with them when I was still alive, so that they would be familiar to me when I died. It was at this point that I began to talk back to the dead.

I conversed in whispers, as they did. My mother used to put a night-light by my bed, and my words seemed to

Dog Years

Liz Williams

link with the shadows that danced over the white walls of the room. I replied to the words that the dead spoke, the fragments and snatches of phrases, telling them that I remembered these things too, or that I'd had similar thoughts. And after a while, the dead started to listen to me, instead.

Gradually, I realized that they were beginning to cluster around me, hanging avid on my every word. Sometimes I felt a brush of air against my mouth and my lips would become cold, as though the dead were sipping the warmth from my words. I liked that, in the hot heart of the fever, and I began to tell stories to the dead, mur-

muring to them, describing everything I saw and remembered. I should have known that it would be too much for them to resist.

One evening, shortly after the blue dusk filled the land, someone came to me.

My mother had left the window open, and I could see a square of twilight sky over the ridge of the hills. As I lay there and watched it, and whispered, a figure began to etch itself onto the hazy air. I fell silent and waited. The figure was slight, not much taller than myself, and the air within its outline seemed to move, distorted by the evening breeze.

Gradually, it solidified, and turned to face me. It was a girl, of more or less my own age, with long pale hair. Slowly, she smiled.

"I've been listening to you," she murmured. My skin prickled like static.

"Are you a ghost?" I asked her.

"Yes," she said, after a pause, and tilted her head to one side. "Yes, that's what I am." Her smile grew sweeter. She stepped forwards.

Wondering, I could see the shadows of flowers in the places where she stepped. She added, "We like to listen to you, you know. You tell marvellous stories."

"It's just what I see. And I don't see much. I've been in bed for so long..."

My voice had a quiver in it; it is one thing to hear voices from the other side of life, another to look their owners in the face. I told my fevered mind that it was nothing more than a dream, and that made it easier. The girl frowned.

"Are you ill, then?"

I was surprised that she did not know this; I thought it was obvious.

"Yes," I said. "They don't know what's the matter with me."

Coming across to the bed, my visitor sat down and rested her hand on my forehead. Coolness drifted across my skin in waves, alternating with the heat of the fever.

"So you are," she said, still smiling. "What a pity."

"I think," I said, and swallowed hard, for the thought was suddenly a frightening one, "I think I might die."

"Oh," my visitor replied. "That would be a shame... You'd be one of us, then, and I don't suppose we'd find you at all interesting." She leaned closer, but I could feel no breath against my face, only a pervasive sweetness underlain with decay, like the scent of hawthorn. "Wouldn't you rather live?"

I looked into her eyes. They were very pale, and the light flickered in their depths as if within a distant mirror. I said, "Yes. Yes, I'd rather live."

She took my hand, as if in sympathy, and again I felt nothing except a faint coolness.

"We could help you," the girl said softly. "Take the fever away, so that you can run out into the sunlight again, play in the rain. Would you like that?"

Her hand on mine was growing colder. Once, when I was very young, I'd touched a line of barbed wire in the middle of winter and my skin had stuck fast, only to tear and

bleed when I pulled free. "But if we help you," she added into my ear, "you must do something for us, in return."

There's always a bargain to be made, so I have learned; it only depends on the price. But suddenly life seemed the most important thing of all, in comparison with this chilly, faded half-glow.

"What do you want?" I whispered. I'd read enough fairy stories by then to think I understood. "My soul?"

The girl's head tilted back and her mouth opened in a burst of slow, soundless laughter. A draught which I could not feel lifted her hair and it floated around her face like water.

"Your soul? We'll have that soon enough; we should we want such a thing? No. We'd just like to borrow your body for a little while, look through your eyes. To see what you see."

"Borrow my body? Like possession?"

"It's not true that spirits can possess. We can't animate you. We can't move your flesh. It would be more than I could do to keep your heart beating and your lungs pumping in and out. But in this world, in this form, I am almost blind. And in the country of the dead nothing is more than a gleam. You can't know how tired one becomes of a world of shadows and smoke... Lend us your eyes for a little time each month, when you're closest to living and death. Lend us your eyes when you bleed. And we'll let you live."

I could not think what to say. She rose from the bed and drifted back towards the window.

"Wait, wait," I said, in a panic in case she should be gone. "All right. I agree."

She smiled at me, came close again. Without saying a word, she bent and kissed my brow and in the instant when she drew away she no longer looked like a girl, for a flickering instant, but something else. Something else, with an animal's eyes. I gasped, and then she was no longer there. I don't remember falling asleep, but the voices were silent and I do not think I dreamed.

Next day, I awoke and everything had changed. I felt hollow inside, like a reed with the pith sucked out, but the fever had gone and so had the pain in my limbs. I made my halting way to the door and called for my mother. After the first few days, my recovery was swift. The ghost had kept her word, and so did I.

I was sent back to school, but a month after that my periods started. On the day that they began I went down to the stream in the evening, and crouched by its banks to watch the water run clear and cold over the speckled rocks towards the weir. It was November now, and growing dark early. I waited in the half light, and there was a sudden tension in the back of my mind, as though someone had pulled a wire taut, matching the cramp in my stomach.

I blinked, and found that the stream had widened. The opposite shore was now more than three strides away, yet somehow closer. It was like looking at two scenes at once, superimposed upon one another. I reached down and trailed my hand through the water. It was icy: snow-melt running fast from the hills. The water was tinged with

red in the last of the light. I looked across at the far shore and saw a woman crouching on the gravel with a linen band in her hands. She could have been my own reflection, but as I gazed she glanced up. Her face was covered by a mask, which had the smooth pallor of bone, and beneath it her eyes gleamed black as oil. I felt a chill run from the crown of my head to my feet, as if I had held up my hand and pulled back lightning.

"Who are you?" I said, but I spoke without a sound. And then there was only the little stream, running swift through the dark valley, and a crowd behind my eyes, avidly drinking in every aspect of the scene.

I don't know how long I sat on the banks of the water, but when the dead retreated, sated at last, I saw that the moon was rising.

I went home to fury. What was I thinking of, my mother cried, to spend more than three hours out alone on a freezing winter night? Did I want to get ill again? And after a pause, because for the first time I had caught a glimpse of what my unnatural bargain might mean, I answered *No*.

After that, it happened again and again, usually three or four times during the course of each period. I became used to slowing and stopping, nodding off to a glimpse of elsewhere, while the spirits of the dead clustered behind my eyes like flies on carrion, watching. I saw the school counsellor, but what could I tell her? She would think I'd gone mad. And then we began to notice something. My sisters and brothers were growing up, voices deepening, faces changing, but I seemed to have stopped at the age of 13.

My parents took me along a gauntlet of doctors, who did CAT scans and neurological tests. Tentatively, they suggested narcolepsy, epilepsy, ADD, but none of them seemed to have any real answers. At last we settled on arrested development with episodes of catatonia; it seemed to cover a multitude of sins.

It didn't appear to effect my intelligence, or even my ability to function. I won a place at university in Glasgow, to study English Lit. And it was around this time that the dead began to grow greedy.

Until my move from home, the shadows who borrowed my body had seemed content with what I offered them. They would cluster and gaze, staring out across the drowsing cornfield, or the corner of a room, or the television: anything seemed to satisfy them, as long as it was in the world of the living. But when I moved to the city, the dead seemed to wake and take an interest. The spirit had told me that they could not possess a living soul, and I do not think that she lied, but they could influence.

They steered me like a ship, gently nudging me in the direction of danger or horror or pain. Like scavengers, they seemed able to sense blood, and their assumption of my reluctant flesh was no longer confined to the peak of my menstrual cycle. I'd find myself standing in front of a road accident, gazing like a ghoul, or wandering down the corridors of the hospital until someone would ask me sharply where I thought I was going, and break the spell.

Maybe the dead could see something that I could not: the moment when the breath leaves the body, the parameters

of pain. I glimpsed myself sometimes, reflected in shop windows: a small, pale figure, hollow-eyed, flitting through the rain. But all I really wanted to do was to look at the sunlight, summer fields, blue sea and pleasant things, and if I became resentful enough the dead would relent, and leave me in peace for a few ordinary, welcome days.

Strangely, this obsession which was not my own gave me a career rather than hindering it. When I left university, I got a job at the local paper, making my way up through the journalistic ranks until I got my first posting as a war correspondent, in Lebanon. I'd aged a little by then, though without make-up I still looked unnaturally young, and it served me in good stead. I gained access to places denied to older male journalists; I suppose because I looked so unthreatening, so unsuspecting.

Beirut was bleached by the heat, but in the evening the coast became a soft purple, the hills on either side of the bay holding the last of the light. I thought it was beautiful. So did the dead, for different reasons.

I gained a reputation for being twice as tough as the men, someone who could walk unflinching through the worst excesses of war. But it wasn't true; my passengers were the ghouls, not I, and what I saw made me weep inside. I never lost the nightmares. And then the dead grew greedier yet.

I was sitting in a bar on El Haifa street, with a group of other journalists, when the bomb went off. Most of the terrorist activity had taken place in the banking district, but evidently Al Sabah had decided to enlarge their sphere of activity. I had just got up to go to the bar when there was a sudden blast of light, searing itself onto my retinas.

The whispering voices of the dead rose in excitement and fury that they could no longer see what was happening. I staggered back against the table; I could hear the roar of fire. Ears ringing, half blinded, I ran out into the street. The bomb had gone off in the market place. As I watched, a burning awning collapsed in on itself, leaving an iron cage where a stall had been. Somewhere, through the singing in my ears, I could hear screaming.

"Closer, closer," whispered the dead, but I was already on my way. At the far end of the market place, a man had been blown against the wall by the blast. I don't know whether he was one of the terrorists, or just a cautious bystander; a gun lay a few feet away. He was covered in blood, one leg shattered below the knee. He had stopped screaming now, and was panting with shock and pain.

And the dead murmured, "Not enough. Take the gun and shoot him in the head. It's not enough." They wanted more.

I stood entranced, staring at the light of the flames as they reflected from the surface of the gun; sending shadows across the rough plaster of the wall; glistening on spilled blood. "Not enough!" the dead wailed, spoilt children in my head. I found myself bending, reaching for the gun. "Hold it in front of his face, let him be afraid. We want to see!" Moving like an automaton, I picked up the gun. It was hot. It burned my fingers, and I dropped it like a coal.

Turning, I ran back through the maze of alleyways to where the emergency services were congregating, and

told them that there was a man in the alleyway who needed treatment. Then I walked grimly back to the hotel, disregarding the disappointed chorus in my head.

I sat on the balcony of the hotel until the sun came up, staring out to sea. When the dawn light first appeared over the long line of the mountains, I looked down at my hands. They were small, the fingers locked together like the hands of a frightened child. The dead had given me my life back, and more. Having found a body they could use, they were eking it out, like a precious resource which must be preserved. How long, I wondered in despair, would this go on?

I looked up, and the girl was standing at the far end of the balcony. She was not the Celtic shade whom I had seen last time. Dark hair spilled across her face and she wore a long burnous, but the eyes were the same. I wondered whether she created her form out of the land itself, tailoring her appearance to fit local myths. It didn't really matter to me how she chose to present herself.

I said, without preamble: "How long?"

The spirit smiled, not pretending to misunderstand. "Nine years, for every one of your normal span."

Like dog years, I thought, but in reverse. It made sense. I was 31 now, but I looked fifteen. A quick mental calculation revealed that at this rate I might live somewhere beyond the 500 mark. I stifled a panicky laugh.

The spirit said with remote reproof: "Many would be grateful."

"I am not." I rose to my feet. "You ask too much, you have become too greedy, insatiable for suffering and pain. I won't pander to you any longer."

"And what do you propose to do?" the spirit asked, with distant amusement.

"Return me to our original bargain. Let me die."

"No. That isn't in my power. You can try, of course. You can throw yourself from this place on which we stand. I can see little enough, but I know that it is high. But we will still let you live, even broken and shattered. Perhaps," the spirit mused, "perhaps it would even be interesting, to experience what you would undergo, in such a form."

I swallowed a cold lump of fear. I didn't fear death any more, but the scenes to which the dead had led me over the years had fed my imagination until it was bloated with horrors. I could well envisage what it might be like to live on in a ruined shell.

"Besides," the spirit continued, "I have told you that we do not possess. You have free will, in the end. All it takes is strength, but perhaps you are not strong enough to resist the allure of mortal ruin? Maybe you even enjoy it, and we are nothing more than the excuse?"

"That's not true," I whispered, and wondered which one of us was lying. And then the sun touched the edge of the mountains and the spirit was gone.

I went back into the hotel room and packed my bag, then booked a flight to London. I faxed the newspaper from the business centre at the airport, to inform my editor of my resignation.

Back in Britain, I returned to my sister's house in Scot-

land. She lived near Lismore, in a small house surrounded by trees. It was a quiet place and in the morning I could walk down to the shore and watch the brown, brackish water lapping over the stones and the herons gliding down the estuary.

Everyone accepted my explanation of burnout and post-traumatic stress. But the dead grew bored. They began to whisper to me again, louder and louder until the world was filled with their voices, like locusts rustling in a field of grain. They spoke of blood and ruin; their voices were seductive and alluring, painting horror in such glowing terms that it was almost impossible to resist. I suppose they were telling me how they saw such things; a different aesthetic from my own. But I remembered the man in the alleyway in Beirut and what they had tried to make me do, and I resisted their call. I already had an idea.

That afternoon, I called the local volunteer bureau and offered my services as a warden on one of the islands off the Scots coast. Setlar was not so remote as to be inaccessible, but it was a quiet place, inhabited mainly by seabirds. The dead, I thought vindictively, could damn well look at something peaceful for a change.

Volunteers for such a post are not so easy to come by, and by the end of the following week I was in residence. I spent long days looking out across the waters of the Firth of Lorn, watching the light as it changed; waiting for storms to roll in. And one by one, the dead fell silent. At first I was thankful, but the quality of that silence gradually made me uneasy, filled as it was with a dreadful, brooding patience. Well, I told myself, if the dead can wait, then so can I.

We saw the year out: June to November, and I elected to stay on the island once the official season was over. As if demonstrating disapproval, an immense storm began on the day that I e-mailed my request to the volunteer section. It hammered down the coast, so that the curve of Mull was lost in rain and the air was full of salt spray. It took its toll on the island, and on other lives, too. On the second night of the storm, I got a distress call.

The call came from the lifeboat service, and it relayed information about a fishing vessel that had overturned on its way back into Oban. The crew were reported as missing; all available personnel were asked to check the shores, in case someone had been washed up. It had happened before; the tides around the Firth are notoriously tricky and often channelled debris through the strait that lay between Setlar and the mainland. I ran down the long path to the shore to search.

I could not see beyond the arch of the rocky headland that separated Setlar's inner bay from the Firth. It was almost dark, and the rain was driving into my face, blinding me. Behind my eyes, I could sense a sudden, hopeful presence. I played the torch over the shingle, and on the second sweep I caught a glimpse of something wet and yellow. A life jacket.

I scrambled down the shore. The man was lying half in and half out of the water. He was unconscious, but as I began to drag him free of the tide, he came round. He was frozen and bruised by the stones, but he had escaped serious injury. Together, we stumbled up the shingle beach

and the winding path of the cliff to the warden's cottage.

As soon as they saw the condition he was in, the dead gave me no peace. They hustled at the back of my eyes, pressure growing moment by moment like a burning in my brain. They whispered, over and over again, "Why do you wait, he is helpless, he is half drowned, you are all alone. No one will ever know. Kill him, do it, do it..." – on and on, until with a distant horror I saw that the stranger had put down his cup of whisky-laced coffee and was staring back at me.

"Why are you looking at me like that?" he asked.

"I – I'm sorry, I'm still a bit dazed, I didn't mean –"

"Be quiet," he said, gently enough. He rose from his chair and came to stand in front of me: dark-haired, dark-eyed, a typical island Scot. He took my chin in his hand and raised my face. I thought of knocking his hand away, but the pity in his face stopped me. He stared for a moment into my eyes with an almost clinical, dispassionate interest.

"Yes," he said. "I thought so. Possessed."

"How do you know?"

"Ah, but I've seen it enough times. My own grandfather, he made a bargain with the dead, long ago. He took them to war and back again; he was one of the ones who liberated Auschwitz." The stranger gave a small, grim smile. "They must have loved that."

In a whisper I said, "What happened to him, in the end?"

"He lived on, ageing one year for every nine. He took to sea, most of the time, but they reached him in the end.

They drove him mad."

"Listen to me," I said. "If there is anything I can do –"

"No, there's nothing. You've made your bargain, and you're stuck with it. They'll be with you for the rest of your long years. But they can be – discouraged."

"How?" I said, and I winced at the look in his eyes.

He said, tentatively, "It won't be easy. Or pleasant. But I can help you, if you'll let me."

And once I had heard what he had to say, I agreed, sealing the second bargain of my life.

That was seven years ago. I still look too young to be a mother of two, or so they tell me. I wouldn't know, myself. Sometimes I stand in front of the mirror that hangs in the hallway of our house in Oban, and reach out to touch its smooth, cold surface, and wonder what I would see if I still had my sight.

I wonder, too, how long I'll live now that the dead have been deprived of their window on the world; I suspect that it will not be so very long, but as long as I die when my daughters are grown, I do not greatly mind. It seems to me that I have seen enough.

Liz Williams's previous stories in this magazine were "A Child of the Dead" (issue 123) and "The Unthinkables" (issue 151). She lives in Brighton, has a PhD in philosophy from Cambridge University, and has turned to writing fiction at a furious rate in the past year or two.

A new British SF magazine! In issue one:

KEITH ROBERTS

Part 1 of a brilliant new 'Kiteworld' novel, 'Drek Yarman.'

ALASTAIR REYNOLDS

'Great Wall of Mars.' A long Coalition-Conjoiner novelette.

CHARLES STROSS

An interplanetary financier is on the run in 'Bear Trap.'

KEITH BROOKE & ERIC BROWN

'Mind's Eye.' She took the upchute to Sundeck...

GARRY KILWORTH

Ex-girlfriends and designer pets don't mix in 'Bonsai Tiger.'

Plus:

EDITORIAL & COMPETITIONS • THE ARCHIVE

Price £3.99 B-Format Paperback 160 pages ISSN 1468-3903.

Worldwide subscriptions: £14 for 4 issues, £24 for 8 issues (overseas copies sent by surface mail. Rates for airmail: £17, £30).

Please send Sterling (£) Cheque, Postal or International Money Order or credit card (Visa, Visa Delta, JCB, MasterCard, Switch) details to: Spectrum Publishing, PO Box 10308, Aberdeen, AB11 6ZR, United Kingdom. Fax +44 1224 572208.

Sorry, but we are currently unable to accept unsolicited manuscripts.



SPECTRUM SF 1
FEBRUARY 2000
mail@spectrumpublishing.com
www.spectrumpublishing.com

SPECTRUM SF 1

Keith Brooke
Eric Brown
Garry Kilworth
Alastair Reynolds
Keith Roberts
Charles Stross

The Denebian Cycle

Keith Brooke & Eric Brown

It started with the firestorm.

A few seconds was all it took for the sky to slide from a deep tropical azure to a solid sheet of charcoal, the contours of individual clouds limned by repeated lightning flickers.

Corrie Asanovic pulled her cape tight across her shoulders. Deep rumbles of thunder, tuned to almost subliminal pitch, reached deep inside her. Static buzzed in the dry air, blue-white sparks jumping between the trees, echoing the lightning high above. Another dry storm, she decided, of the kind that usually drew in towards dusk. This one was earlier than usual, and far more intense.

She pulled the pack onto her back and turned to look for Sam Reubens. There was no sign of him, but that was not unusual. Rube often wandered off on his own, following some new spoor, or the cry of one of the local animal forms. Rube didn't care about the guidelines for appropriate fieldwork, no matter how often Skip Jennings critted him. Rube was, to be blunt, one self-centred son of a bitch.

Corrie glanced at the comms decal tattooed onto the back of her left wrist. *Rube*, she thought, and the decal told her: 36°, 12.4m.

She spoke into the decal: "Rube, are you done yet? I think we should be getting back."

Silence. Corrie scratched at her cheek where, despite her best efforts at hygiene, a new growth of plaque was taking hold. The plaques were a kind of colonial animal, growing like corals wherever they could take hold. She didn't know quite where they fitted in the taxonomic schema Rube had worked out, but there was some kind of complex symbiosis going on there: a kind of animate lichen, was the best terrestrial analogy she could come up with.

They were a nuisance, whatever. It was ironic, in a way: here they were in a rich, alien environment, where there was next to nothing a human could eat, yet still the local semi-animate life-forms persisted in trying to col-

onize any exposed surface. Something to do with the natural oils excreted by human skin, Rube had said. He just let the plaques grow, claiming it did no harm, although Corrie was sure he did it simply to be different.

"It's just... storm," he commed now, his soft voice lisping in Corrie's ear, the sound breaking up with the storm's interference. "Go back if you... I'm staying out in the field."

Bastard. He knew Corrie wouldn't return without him: that way *she'd* be the one the skipper critted.

Corrie and Rube were about a kay and a half out from the camp. Cataloguing, sampling, recording: building up an ecofile of the 100 by 100 metre quadrant Skip had allocated them the day before. There were 48 of them in the survey team, deposited on Deneb 5 for 120 days. A low profile survey, to provide the basis for any decision on whether to make contact with the local sub-industrial sentients.

In and out: a scientific snatch squad.

The blast threw Corrie face-down on the ground.

She groaned, rolled over onto her back.

Slowly her flash-blinded vision started to return. She rubbed her eyes, and her hand brushed against her hair: normally collar-length and lifeless, now it was standing on end.

She clawed at it irrationally, feeling that somehow she had been invaded.

"Well, look at you," said Rube, emerging from the trees. He was stripped to the waist, vivid weals of red, gold and green plaques encrusting his chest and arms – growing so thickly, he had earlier boasted, that his horn of plenty necklace had become effectively grafted into the scaled-over flesh of his neck.

She could imagine herself: sitting on her fat ass in the mud, clawing at her hair, panicking. "The lightning," she said, feebly. "I... I think I was hit by the lightning."

Rube laughed at her. "You'd sure know about it if you were," he said. "Near miss, is all. You planning on sitting there all day?"

The bastard was enjoying it. According to the expedition's constitution Corrie and Rube were equals: even Skip only governed by consensus, after all. But Rube had been working in the field for 30 or more years and this was Corrie's first assignment. And, as Corrie kept finding herself thinking, Rube was a grade-A bastard.

Would it have been any different if she'd let him fuck her, she wondered? Committed scientist that she was, that was one experiment she never wanted to try.

She scrambled to her feet. *Ten-kay map*, she thought, and her comms decal showed her a low-res map of the region, the image snowstormed with static interference. Picked out in gold were 24 dots, marking the locations of the survey teams. Six of the teams were already back at base. Corrie suspected most of the others were on their way.

"We'd better get back," she said. The air was still thick with static, the darkened sky alive with lightning: strange, spreading sheets and glows, sudden forks, a continual background flicker. This was no ordinary storm.

Rube just looked at her, then turned his back and headed into the fleshy jungle. Corrie followed him, trying hard not to stare at his scaly back, failing. The man was obscene.

She tried comming base, but all she got was a hiss of static and a patronizing glance from Rube.

The trees here were all young growth: what appeared to be a mature tropical jungle was really the product of a single growing season, albeit a season that lasted a little over 35 standard years. The trunks were fleshy, packed with the kind of oils that attracted the colonies of plaques. Any journey through the jungle was an unpleasant experience: suspended from the trees were long, trailing lianas that clung like cobwebs, a cloying curtain that hosted enormous colonies of mites and bugs and god knows what else.

Corrie walked with both arms in front of her and a gauze mask over her face, but that didn't make her passage much easier.

Rube just walked on, regardless.

Here, deeper in the jungle, the storm was diminished, but Corrie knew that it persisted from the constantly flickering light and the nasty metal taste to the air.

Some time later, she paused to brush the crap from her hair. Most of the other teams were within a kay or two of the base now, drawn as if by a magnet. She looked around, but she didn't recognize this part of the jungle, even though they must have passed this way about ten hours before. Although she hated to admit it, this godforsaken jungle all looked pretty much the same to her.

They were only about half a kay from camp now.

Rube was out of sight. Thirty metres up ahead, her decal told her. She set out again, walking faster to catch up. She hated to admit that she depended on him, but the sense of isolation from being alone for more than a few minutes was horribly oppressive.

"Hey, Corrie," he commed. "Better get up here quick, you hear?"

There was something different about his voice, something urgent.

She broke into a jog. "What is it?" she spoke into her wrist. Silence.

Then, Rube's voice, lisping softly in her ear again: "Trouble, Corrie. Big trouble."

Seconds later she broke out of a screen of undergrowth and almost crashed into Rube's crusty back. He was hunched to one side, talking into his wrist on a different channel. He barely glanced at her, just gestured ahead.

They had emerged on a small shelf in the face of the hill, where the jungle descended towards a sludgy creek of a river they called the Brown Amazon. From this viewpoint they should be able to see the clearing where the Survey had set up base, but not now.

Dark clouds clung to the incline, billowing and twisting, plummeting down the slope towards the flood basin. At first Corrie thought it was some strange atmospheric effect: a ground-hugging, sooty fog.

But then she caught the acrid taste of smoke on the air, and she saw that the flickering she had taken for yet another lightning effect was actually caused by flames.

The forest was on fire.

Corrie barged past Rube, intent on the path that led down the escarpment towards the base camp.

After a couple of seconds she paused, turned.

Rube was still standing on the shelf, just staring at her. "What you planning?" he asked. "Going to beat out the flames with your bare hands?"

She hadn't been planning anything. Hadn't been thinking. She just knew she should be doing *something*.

The bastard was right, much as she hated to admit it.

Below her, the forest plunged down the escarpment, thinning in places where the bedrock broke through the thin jungle soil. About 300 metres down the slope she could see the first flames leaping across the treetops, spreading at a frightening rate from tree to tree.

"It's the oils," said Rube. "Everything's full of it: trees, lianas, even the bugs."

Just then another tree flared up like a molotov cocktail.

"Like dropping a match on gasoline," Rube went on.

She should be able to see the base camp from here, Corrie realized. Should be able to see the off-white shell of their Vulcan lander. But all she could see was flames and smoke.

She turned away, peered at the decal on the back of her wrist. Her eyes were too fogged with tears to focus, but she was sure there were fewer than 24 gold dots on the map now.

The survivors assembled in a clearing, about a kay from the burned out ruins of base camp. Corrie looked around the gathering: what a sad and sorry sight, she thought. Her colleagues lay on the ground or sat against the trees, utterly bewildered and defeated by the tragic turn of events.

They were lucky, she supposed. Lucky not to have burned, like Skip and Jenny and Walter and...

Thirty-five dead, in all.

They'd had no chance, Imran had said. The walls of flame had just wrapped round the base camp like a mil-

itary pincer movement. Twelve dead and the Vulcan a burned out husk, along with all the food and water supplies for the next hundred-plus days. The others had been picked off by the fire in ones and twos as they attempted to return to camp.

Earlier that day they had searched the jungle for survivors, finding none. It had been a grisly process. They had buried the bodies in makeshift graves beside the clearing, marked so that they could be exhumed when the *Darwinian* returned. More disturbing, to Corrie, than the sight of the burned and twisted corpses had been the smell of the over-cooked meat. Despite herself, it had cruelly reminded her that she hadn't eaten for hours.

Across the clearing, Sue and Tanya hugged each other. Corrie smiled to herself, envying what they were sharing. Christ, it was going to be hard for the next few months: we need to take whatever comfort we can find.

Beside her, Rachel lay in a foetal ball. Corrie reached out and touched the back of her hand. The Somalian had lost her lover in the burned-out Vulcan, had slipped into hysteria on discovering that Ahmed had perished. Fortunately, one of the survivors had been equipped with a medical kit containing sedatives.

Now Rachel shifted a little, until Corrie found herself stroking the girl's head in her lap.

Rube was holding forth in the centre of the clearing. "It's simple," he was arguing. "Survival. That's what it's all about now. We have 108 days until the *Darwinian* jumps back within range. When the *Darwinian* returns, we ping her with our distress beacons and they send another Vulcan down to lift us out. It's as simple as that."

"Rube's right," said Jake, the native-American zoologist. "It's a matter of redistributing our priorities. We still have to avoid any contact with the native sentients, but we have to forget any idea of completing the survey work. We –"

"Fuck the sentients," Rube said. "If my survival means making contact, then that's what I do, regardless of any questionable effects on cultural evolution."

Corrie was horrified. "How can you say that?" she demanded, surprising herself with her vehemence. "How can you say that any individual's life is more important than the damage contact might do to an emergent culture?"

"This isn't some college role-playing scenario now," Rube said. "You live or you die. It's that simple."

"Hey, hey," Imran said. The Australian xentropologist looked around the group. "We're getting hypothetical, okay? Rube's right: we got to survive. Corrie's right: we got to minimize our impact on the native situation. We got a little over a hundred days and we got to survive. We're scientists, right? We've been studying the native life-forms, right?" He paused, looked around the group. "Who could be in a better position to live off the land than a group of highly trained ecologists?"

Hunger.

Not the missed-a-couple-of-meals kind of hunger Corrie knew from deadline time at college. Not even the hunger she'd experienced on a survival training course, part of the prep for this expedition.

Real hunger.

Gnawing away at her gut. Every movement an enormous effort, every breath laboured. Her body running out of fuel. Head aching, brain thumping inside her skull, her vision swimming, spinning whenever she moved.

Thirst, too. So little to drink...

Stripped to the waist in the oppressive dry heat of the jungle, Corrie leaned against a grotesquely bulging tree trunk. She hugged Rachel to her. The girl, in her grief, had wordlessly sought consolation, glad to accept whatever comfort Corrie could provide.

Earlier that day, Rube had made some crass comment about another couple of dykes in our midst, and only intervention from Imran had prevented Corrie from attacking the bastard.

"I'm talking irony, right?" Imran said. The thin Australian was sitting cross-legged in the forest litter. He waved a hand, indicating the lush vegetation. "We got our own Amazonia here, I've never been anywhere so full of life as this. And –"

"Water, water everywhere, but fuck all to drink," croaked Corrie.

Imran looked puzzled, didn't get the reference. "Nothing to eat," he went on. "All this, and nothing to eat."

Corrie nodded. Imran was okay, if a little too earnest and literal-minded at times. What he said was true.

Corrie could just about manage to keep down a few nibbled fragments from some of the plants and coralline plaques, but any more and she'd vomit until she felt as if she was turning herself inside out. Something to do with the complex oils packed into the cells of just about every living thing in the jungle. Some of the others had even worse reactions if they tried to eat. Rachel, as if her grief was not burden enough, had found it impossible to keep down so much as a mouthful.

Corrie didn't think it could be long before they suffered their first casualty since the firestorm.

"We have to move," she said to Imran now. "Migrate."

Imran looked puzzled. "The Vulcan's burned out," he said. "No transport."

From across the clearing, Rube snorted. "Guess lover-girl didn't think of that one, hey?"

Corrie ignored him. "Then we walk. Before we're too wasted to move."

Sue and Tanya glanced at each other. "It makes sense," Tanya said, casting a shy, heartening glance towards Corrie. "There's nothing to keep us here."

"But it'll all be like this," Imran said.

"Think about it," Corrie said. "Think of the climatic cycle. Thirty-five years ago this jungle was a tundra, emerging from the five year winter. The cold season's closing in again in a few months. If we head north the cold season will be more advanced."

There would be rain, or snow even. Drinkable water. And maybe there would be food: if, as Rube argued, the oily, fleshy nature of jungle life-forms was an adaptation to the dry season, maybe things would be different in the more temperate regions.

Maybe. It was a chance, at least.

Imran looked up, his gaze taking in the gathered survivors. "Okay," he said. "What do you think? Let's put it

to the vote. Who says we leave here, move north?"

Heart hammering, Corrie raised her hand.

Deneb was setting, its deep ruddy light filtering through the high foliage, reducing the bloated shapes of the trees to eerie shadows. Corrie walked on, supporting Rachel. They had set off at dawn, and for the first five hours Corrie had been fuelled by hope. At least, now, they were doing something other than sitting around the clearing and bemoaning their fate. Last night they had voted to move north with a majority of twelve to two: it had cheered Corrie that Rube had been one of the two dissenting voices.

At noon, Imran had called a rest break. Jake had spent a poor night, and that morning Rube had cited his colleague's condition as a reason not to move. But Jake had argued that their only hope lay in finding food and water, and again Rube had been defeated.

For an hour they had rested in the jungle, while the three fittest of the team scavenged for water and some of the more edible fruits. They had returned with the single water canister, salvaged from the wreck of the Vulcan, half full of vapid, oily water, and half a dozen pineapple-like growths.

They had divided the spoils, pathetically inadequate as they were, and Corrie had helped Rachel force down a few mouthfuls of water and a sliver of fruit. Ten minutes later Rachel vomited it all back in putrid-smelling green bile. Corrie had managed to keep her own paltry meal down, but the fruit had done nothing to assuage her hunger. The oily flesh sat heavily in her belly, deeply unsatisfying.

An hour after the meal they had set off again, and Corrie had experienced none of her earlier optimism. She began to wonder, as the heat increased and her stomach spasmed with hunger pains, if perhaps Rube had been right. Perhaps they should have stayed put...

Now the sun was going down and the heat was diminishing. From somewhere behind them, Imran called that they should walk for another 30 minutes, and then think about making camp for the night.

During the day, Corrie had watched an enfeebled power-struggle take place among the men. Almost as if by consensus, it had been Imran who had taken tacit charge of the survivors. It was Imran who asked for suggestions, put ideas to the vote; he had settled the occasional disagreement, collated what was known about the planet and catalogued options.

Once or twice Rube had made his objections known, suggested options opposite those proposed by Imran. Always, Imran had thrown the debate open, asked for a democratic vote – and always Rube had been defeated. Corrie was pleased to note that she was not alone in her dislike of the querulous, annoying loud-mouth.

She had noticed another division among their ranks, too. Ever since last night, the women had gathered apart from the men. Tanya and Sue, Rachel and herself formed a group away from the other nine survivors. It had not been until they had set off again after the rest break that Corrie had become aware of the division: the women led

the way, Tanya and Sue in the lead, followed by Rachel and herself. Then had come the men, led by Imran, with Rube bringing up the rear like some dissatisfied, skulking dog.

"I'm tired, Corrie..." Rachel whispered.

Corrie halted. Rachel was leaning against her, and she realized that she had been virtually carrying the woman for the last hundred metres.

"Okay, not far to go now. We'll find a clearing. Stop for the night."

"Thirsty. Don't know how thirsty I am, Corrie..."

Corrie smiled to herself. Like to bet, she thought. "We'll make camp for the night and collect water," she said, realizing as she spoke how terribly inadequate were her words.

Tanya had returned to see why they had stopped. She looked from Rachel to Corrie, shook her head. "I'll take her," she said quietly.

"Would you?" Surprisingly, Corrie experienced such a surge of gratitude that she felt like weeping.

Tanya shucked Rachel onto her broad back and strode off, soon catching up with Sue. Lightened of her burden, Corrie walked on.

Not long after setting off that morning, they had happened upon a trail through the undergrowth, long and straight and heading due north. Imran had speculated that it was more than a mere animal track; he suggested that the Denebians followed the trail on their long, migratory treks to the cooler climes of the north. From what little information they had been able to gather, Corrie knew that the Denebians were a tribal hunter-gatherer species, migrating with the planet's 39-year seasonal cycle: in the winter they gathered in the south, then as the warm season set in they split into tribal groups and headed north to stake out summer territories. The survey had set down at the southern fringe of the Denebians' summer range: close enough, they hoped, to observe without their activities being detected.

Corrie wasn't convinced that the trail was anything other than an animal track, but it was a blessing to be free of the undergrowth and the bug-filled curtain of lianas.

What seemed like hours later, Corrie heard a shout from way back in the jungle. She came to a halt and sank onto her haunches. Weakly she called ahead, and a minute later Sue and Tanya appeared, stripped to the waist and slick with sweat.

Tanya knelt carefully and eased Rachel, unconscious now, to the ground. Sue sat cross-legged beside the Somali, wiping sweat from the girl's feverish brow. Minutes later the men arrived. They collapsed to the ground, eyes closed as they lay on their backs, breathing hard.

Rube seated himself against the bole of a tree, taking in an eyeful of Tanya's generous breasts.

"Okay," Imran said. He paused between words, as if the effort of speaking was becoming too much. "Okay... we've no water, and precious little pineapple..." He smiled to himself, no doubt noting the irony of naming something so inedible after a fruit most of them would

willingly murder for.

"Any volunteers to go and look for fruit and water?"

Corrie raised a hand. Anything would be better than sticking around and suffering Rube's lascivious stares. One of the men, an engineer called Pablo, volunteered too. He took the water canister. Corrie was on fruit duty.

She followed the path ahead, while Pablo back-tracked and scouted the trail they had come along. Soon she left behind the sound of the team's desultory conversation. A strange silence sealed around her; after the cacophony of animal noises during the daylight hours, twilight spelled a period of quiescence. Even though she knew the jungle contained no predators that might endanger her safety, she nevertheless felt a quick and irrational fear. She recalled the last time she had been alone in the jungle, just before the discovery of the fire, and how she had hated herself for wanting Rube's company then. She glanced at the decal on the back of her hand: 12 golden dots, 70 metres due south.

She stepped from the trail, hands raised to fend off the lianas. There were some spiky bushes here, the kind that sometimes harboured the pineapple-form plaque colonies that were vaguely edible.

But no, this time they were bare. She straightened, scratching at an encrusted graze on her arm. And then she saw the standing stones.

They were in a clearing about five metres from the path. Corrie stared in disbelief. The light was dimming fast, but even so her eyes were not mistaken. She counted perhaps a dozen tall, pale green stones, roughly hewn, arranged in an oval approximately ten metres by five.

Wondering, she spoke Imran's name into her wrist-decal. "I've come across something that might be of interest. Not exactly what we were looking for—"

"What?" Imran's question sounded urgent in her ear.

"I don't know. Stone artefacts. Standing stones of some type."

"I'm on my way."

Corrie stepped into the clearing. She passed the first menhir, a little taller than herself, and for the first time it came to her that she was looking upon the work of sentient beings that were not human. So far, she had been limited to pix of the Denebians taken before landing – and the first alleged evidence of the natives had been the north-south forest trail that may have been a migratory pathway. The standing stones were an order of magnitude more advanced than the trail.

Corrie moved past the first stone, and then the ground shifted, creaked, and she was falling.

She screamed, and her fall was broken by something yielding, cushioning her. She controlled her breathing, aware of her crazed heartbeat. She was fine, she was still alive; she had not been speared in some primitive animal trap. I'm okay, she told herself, her laughter spiced with tears of relief.

She was lying perhaps two metres below ground level. The last of the sunlight that reached this far revealed a pit, the walls of which glistened with some dark and viscous substance.

She heard a voice in her ear. Imran. "Corrie. Are you okay? I heard you scream –"

"I'm okay. I'm in the clearing. I fell into a... well, God knows what it is. Some kind of pit. Watch your step, there might be more of them."

Only when she tried to stand did she realize that she was ensconced in the same soft, yielding substance that comprised the walls of the pit. She sank back into its sticky embrace, laughing to herself.

She had no idea what made her reach out, scoop a handful of slime from the wall next to her head and raise it to her nose. It smelled... well, there was no other word for it, *appetizing*. She stuck out her tongue and touched the gobbet of goo. It tasted slightly sweet, a little meaty, satisfying. She bit into the stuff, its juices cascading over her tongue and down her throat. Unlike the other native food she'd tasted, this stuff – whatever it was – not only tasted good but felt as if, already, it was working to banish her hunger.

She was aware of movement above her and looked up. Imran was peering down at her over the rim of the pit.

"What the hell...?" he began.

Corrie, laughing, raised the manna into the air. "You won't believe it," she called up, "but I think we're saved."

Rachel walked across the clearing, avoiding the holes in the ground, and crouched before Corrie.

In just three days Rachel had regained her health. She had recovered her strength, put on weight, started to recover some of her former confident swagger. Jake, too, had been miraculously revived from the brink of an ugly death. They had excavated over a dozen pits in the clearing, each one packed with a store of semi-liquefied meat.

They had taken turns to trek into the surrounding jungle on water-collecting duty, though they discovered that water was no longer a prerequisite for survival. As well as providing solid food, the meat also contained sufficient liquid to more than meet their needs.

Now Rachel passed Corrie the canister. Corrie drank, more out of gratitude to Rachel than to quench her thirst.

The black woman smiled shyly. "I just wanted to say thank you – for helping me back there. I wouldn't have made it without you."

Corrie reached out and took the woman's hand. "You'd have done the same for me, Rache. We're all in this together."

The others sat around the clearing, sated and relaxed. All except Rube, that is. He went to stand over Imran in the confrontational manner they had all come to recognize.

Imran looked up. "What is it, Rube?"

A silence came down over the gathering. Corrie glanced at the other women, then looked across at Rube.

"I've been thinking..." Rube paused, looked around the staring faces. Corrie stopped herself from making a caustic comment.

"I know we've speculated what these things might be," he went on, gesturing towards the open pits. "But we haven't considered the consequences."

He let a silence develop. He looked around the team, taking everyone in. At last Imran said, "What consequences?"

"So we think we stumbled across meat stored by the aliens," Rube said. "Some kind of big animal slaughtered, prepared and buried ritually by the Denebians for retrieval during the migration season..."

Imran was nodding. "It's as good a hypothesis as any," he said. They had already considered, and rejected, the possibility that it was a burial ground: the stores of meat were simply too large and well-preserved to match what they knew about the Denebian physique.

Rube waved. "I'm not arguing with the theory," he said. "But I've been considering the results of what we've done here –"

Corrie cut in. "What? Are you suggesting that we should have left the meat well alone, Rube? Just continued north and starved to death?" She realized that she was hardly being fair – at least she should hear what Rube had to say – but at the same time she experienced a malicious satisfaction at baiting him.

He shook his head. "I'm saying nothing of the kind. I just want us to consider what we've done. Listen, a few days ago it was you who was going on about how we shouldn't interfere with the natives..."

His gaze raked the dozen watching faces. "So we've dug up and consumed what I suggest was a valuable, and clearly specially prepared, food resource. I don't think the Denebians will be best pleased when they return to find their larder raided."

Jake spoke up, "By that time we'll be long gone, Rube. I mean, how long till the winter season kicks in? A month? Two? We'll have moved on by then..."

"Which brings us to the main question," Imran began. He stood up, staring absently into the excavated pits. "We've almost finished this store," he said. "So what do we do next?"

"I think we should keep to the original plan –" this was Rachel, shyly glancing towards Corrie as if seeking agreement – "and head north. You never know, we might find more of these stores: if there's one, there's bound to be more. Next time we'll ration ourselves instead of gorging on the stuff. That way we'll easily make it until the *Darwinian* arrives."

Corrie nodded. "That makes sense. We've got over our initial illnesses. We can move north at our leisure, looking for more of the standing stones –" She stopped there and looked at Rube. "Or would you rather we left the meat for the Denebians?"

His gaze was pure dislike. "Hark at the hypocrite who six days ago was worried about the damage contact might do to emergent cultures –"

"That was before we were starving to death!" Corrie began.

He shook his head and turned to Imran. "I suggest that we keep watch at night," he said. "And keep our weapons at the ready. I wouldn't want to be sleeping when the Denebians arrive."

In the event, they were all wide awake when the aliens discovered their presence.

It was five days since Corrie had stumbled upon the subterranean cache, and they had finished the last of the

meat the day before. Already, just hours without a meal, Corrie was hungry. She headed into the jungle, searching for any fruit they might have missed, something to fill her stomach before they headed north in search of another underground meat store.

She spent an hour foraging, and to her surprise she found a small clump of green fruits shaped like hand-grenades that had been overlooked by the others. Or maybe someone had tried one and found it to be inedible. She was debating whether to call it a day and return to the clearing when she thought she saw something move in the distance to her left.

She turned and peered. In the aqueous light of the jungle she made out a series of dancing shadows that might have been the play of palm-like leaves in the light of the sun. She told herself she was seeing things and turned towards the clearing.

And screamed.

The thing was running ahead of her, tall and lithe and quick, through the undergrowth towards the clearing. One second it was there, and the next it had vanished, and Corrie was left doubting the very evidence of her eyes.

It had been perilously tall and thin, jet black and hunched, and had moved with frightening alacrity.

She got through to Imran. "I've just seen –"

"Corrie. Get back here."

"I'm on my way. I think I saw –"

"I know. We've met them too."

Corrie rushed back to the clearing, heart pounding at the thought of what she might find. She pushed through the last buggy drape of lianas, stepped into the circle of standing stones, and stopped.

Her colleagues were on their feet, huddled together in the middle of the clearing. They were staring around them at the host of flitting, silent, shadowy figures identical to the one Corrie had seen in the jungle.

She recognized the attenuated somatypes of the native Denebians from her pre-drop studies aboard the *Darwinian*. But the available stock of images, indistinct and pixelated, were a poor representation of these aliens, failing to capture the essence of the creatures. It was their movements that made them so very alien.

They darted around the clearing with rapid, spry articulation of their long, double-jointed limbs, often coming to a sudden stop and scrutinizing the ground with eerie, immobile intensity.

A combination of the failing light and the speed at which they moved left Corrie with only a fleeting impression of their facial appearance. Wide cheeks, long snouts, a cross between reptile and insect. And their eyes... The one thing she could be sure of in the twilight was the fact that they possessed huge, crimson eyes.

Quickly, she moved towards Rachel and the others.

Rube was standing apart from the team, watching the antics of the nearest alien. He glanced at Corrie as she reached out and hugged Rachel.

"Welcome to the party," he said with cavalier bravado. "Allow me to introduce the Gargoyles. They seem to be just a little puzzled as to what we've done with their food

supplies.”

Gargoyles, Corrie thought. Despite herself, she thought the name apt.

Perhaps a dozen aliens were cavorting around the clearing, darting down into the open pits with the speed of scurrying insects. They paid no attention to the humans – indeed, Corrie thought, they’re acting as if we don’t exist.

Occasionally the aliens ceased their dervish waltz around the pits, paused long enough to reach out and touch each other with horribly long fingers like waving twigs.

They had checked every pit by now, finding them empty, and it seemed inevitable that they should at last turn their attention to the humans.

Corrie had no way of anticipating her reaction when the Gargoyles, as one unit, turned and rushed towards the humans. They stopped perhaps a metre short, as if their advance had been calculated to startle. Corrie stifled a scream, took a deep, juddering breath as the Gargoyles – there was no other way she could think of them, now – took it in turns to inspect the humans. They darted back and forth, peering with huge red eyes, from time to time reaching out to touch and prod with stiff, cold fingers.

Corrie felt a hand palpitate her right thigh, and her heart almost ceased beating.

At last, after what seemed an age, the Gargoyles retreated and conferred, touching each other in a brief and frantic semaphore. Even then they were never still; always at least half of their group were darting this way and that in a fidgety, ceaseless pavane.

As Corrie watched, one Gargoyle ran nimbly from the clearing and climbed the nearest tree. It did so without apparent effort, and with no reduction of speed. Its rapid ascent of the vertical bole was like an optical illusion.

“What do you think they’ll do to us?” someone asked.

Imran shook his head. “They’ve shown no signs of hostility. I don’t know... Let’s just keep together and do nothing stupid, okay?”

The alien descended from the tree and stilted across the clearing. It was carrying something now, a bunch of what might have been some kind of small, purple fruit, like wrinkled aubergines. It passed the bunch to another alien, who advanced upon the humans.

It towered over Rube, perhaps a head taller, then broke a fruit from the bunch and passed it to him. Hesitantly, he accepted. The Gargoyle broke off another fruit and passed it to the next human. Like this it proceeded until every one of the team was holding one of the small, furry-skinned fruits.

“So what gives?” Rube said, addressing the alien. “You want us to eat these things, is that it?”

As if in response, the Gargoyle snapped a fruit from those that remained and raised it to its mandibles. Corrie did not actually see the alien eat the fruit, but when it lowered its hands the growth was no longer there.

“I think that’s what it wants us to do,” Imran said.

Rube guffawed. “Hey, if you ugly bastards think for one second that...” Disgusted, he tossed the fruit away.

Instantly, the nearest Gargoyle snatched up the fruit

and, with a movement too quick for the eye to follow, advanced upon Rube and flashed a hand quickly across his face.

Rube doubled up, spluttering. When he stood upright, Corrie could see that the flesh of the fruit was mashed into his mouth, vivid pink juice spilling over his chin.

He wiped his mouth on the back of his arm, glaring at the alien.

“I think,” Imran said, “that we’d better eat the things.”

Corrie looked from her own fruit to Rube. He seemed to be suffering no ill-effects other than a loss of dignity. Hesitantly, along with Tanya and the others, she raised the fruit to her lips and took an experimental bite.

Sharp, very juicy, and extraordinarily pleasant.

Then Rube collapsed. Immediately, Corrie was aware that her vision was swimming. She tried to focus on Rachel, but the woman’s face floated bizarrely in her vision. Corrie opened her mouth to speak, but no sound came. She seemed to be drifting, detached from her senses. It was not an altogether unpleasant experience.

She watched the aliens. They seemed to be closing in, surrounding her team. Corrie knew, vaguely, that she should be alarmed, but the fact was that she could bring herself to feel nothing.

She was aware of cold fingers, prodding her, and her last thought was that they were being shepherded from the clearing.

The cave was a big, horseshoe-shaped cavern excavated into the side of the limestone bluff, with two entrances and a central, hub-like pillar. Set into the curving wall of the cave was a series of hollowed-out cells, each one packed with vegetation from the jungle floor, forming so many beds.

Corrie lay on her back and tried to recall the journey here. It had seemed to last forever, but it could only have lasted a matter of hours. They had arrived in darkness, she knew. Five to ten kilometres, she guessed.

How long had they lived in the cave, as guests of the Gargoyles? Corrie raised her hand, stared at the decal. She concentrated, but the figures there made no sense at all. A part of her – the part that knew she was neglecting her duties and herself – understood also that this was not right: another part told her to accept the beneficence of the aliens. It was the only way they had of surviving until the return of the *Darwinian*.

She pushed herself upright and looked around the cave. The others occupied their individual cells, either sleeping or simply too blitzed to move.

She struggled from her own cell and stood on unsteady legs. Her vision swam, and her sense of balance was affected. Across the cave, in a cell opposite her own, Rachel was sitting upright and staring at her with uncomprehending eyes.

Slowly, Corrie made her way across to the Somalian woman.

She sat on the edge of the cell, reached out and took Rachel’s fingers. She raised her other hand, indicating the decal. “How long...?” she managed.

Rachel stared at her, shook her head. “How long until

the *Darwinian* arrives?" Her words were slurred, retarded. She looked mystified.

Corrie shook her head. "No – I mean, yes... How long have we been here?"

Rachel stared at her. "On Deneb 5?"

Corrie opened her mouth to speak. Communication was almost impossible. She could not contain the progression of their conversation in her mind.

She had no idea how long they had been on Deneb 5. It seemed like a lifetime. Her other life, her life on Earth, seemed like the memories of another person altogether.

She hit her temple with the heel of her right hand. "No, I mean – how long have we been here, in the cave?"

Rachel was smiling to herself, her eyes staring at a point way beyond Corrie. Slowly, the black woman lay on her back and closed her eyes.

"A week," she heard the voice, issuing from the next cell. "Maybe a little more."

She turned. It was Rube. He lay propped on a pile of vegetation in his cell, staring at her. She focused on him, wondering if her eyes were playing tricks on her. The entirety of Rube's torso now seemed to be scabbed over with the iridescent plaque, almost like a covering of chitin. His head sat atop the multi-coloured armour, bloated but unaffected by the plaque. A ginger growth of beard testified to the possibility that they had been in the cave for a week.

"The *Darwinian*," Corrie said. She stopped. That seemed the extent of her ability to articulate the thought swimming nebulously in her head. She forced herself to concentrate. "I mean... how long before it gets here?"

Rube laughed. "Jesus Christ, does it matter?" he said. Like Rachel, his voice was slowed, slurred. "What's the rush? We're doing okay, aren't we? You were always one cocky, uptight bitch, Asanovic."

She waved in futile disgust and pushed herself away from the cell. She made her way around the cave, stopping before each of the dozen cells in turn. Imran... he too was out of it, lying back on his litter of leaves with a beatific expression on his face. Jake – he was sitting upright, legs crossed, staring right through Corrie. When she waved a hand before her eyes, he didn't so much as blink. She moved on, around the curve of the cavern, and came to the cell in which Tanya and Sue huddled together. The women were naked, sweat-slicked limbs entwined. For a while they had conscientiously peeled the plaques from each others' bodies, but they had neglected the duty for the past few days. Corrie made out invading colonies of the plaque, like lichen, splotched across the women's fattening bodies: a patchwork alien carapace.

She reached out and touched a leg, waggled it back and forth in a bid to elicit some response, but Tanya just moaned and turned over.

Corrie looked around the cave. Her thoughts were slow. She wanted nothing more than to lie down in her cell, sup on the juice of another fruit.

Something made her walk past her cell and approach the cave entrance. She closed her eyes, squinting. After the half-light of the cave, the glare of the setting sun was

a painful dazzle. Her sight adjusted at last and she made out the bloated hemisphere of Deneb going down behind the jungle on the far side of the river.

On the shelving sands before the cave-mouths, a triptych of Gargoyles stood very still, as if frozen. Corrie had often seen them like this, in postures that made no sense in the human schema of arrested motion.

They looked more than ever like insects in their immobility.

Corrie approached the aliens and walked around them. Their eyes were open, each pair focused on a different point. They seemed not to notice her.

She struggled to fathom what made the attention of the Gargoyles so frightening. For days the aliens had fed and watered the stranded humans, supplying them with half a dozen varieties of fruit, all of which had a sedative, soporific effect on the team.

And yet, while the Gargoyles danced attendance to the human's need for sustenance, in all other respects they seemed to ignore the team.

It was this disparity that was so eerie.

Corrie smiled to herself, pleased that she had managed to work out something so complex. She knew why, though. It was sunset, hours since they had last been fed, and the mind-crippling effects of the fruit were wearing off.

She reached out, touched the cold, hard skin of the closest alien. It turned, suddenly, and stared at her with its ember-like eyes.

She controlled her breathing. Her heart gave a panicky little flutter. "Thank you," she said. Until this moment, she hadn't understood that the complex array of emotions she felt towards the Gargoyles included gratitude, but she realized that if not for their succour she could well be dead by now.

The thing stared at her, or past her, unmoving. She raised a hand to her mouth, mimicked eating. "For the food. Thank you."

Without warning, the Gargoyle twisted, from the head down, in a single, flowing movement, until it stood with its back to her, its head angled downwards. Corrie had tried to communicate with the Gargoyles before, but had never got through. The beings didn't seem to recognize that her sounds and gestures were an attempt to convey information. She wondered, as she had before, if an individual Gargoyle had the capacity to reason through such ideas. So much of their behaviour appeared ritualized, instinctive even. They clearly communicated with each other, but then so too do honey bees and chimps. The aliens showed no sign of curiosity about the humans in their charge, made no effort to communicate other than to ensure that the humans ate. They were highly organized, but in the week or so since first contact Corrie had seen little in the life of the settlement that evidenced culture or society. Were the Gargoyles even sentient at all, she wondered?

She turned at a sound behind her. A dozen Gargoyles were emerging from the caves in the face of the limestone bluff. They almost ran, leaning forwards, on their double-kneed legs, carrying fruit towards the humans' cave.

Corrie felt a finger in her back, prodding her towards the cave. She obeyed, followed the other Gargoyles inside,

and returned to her cell.

This time, though, when a Gargoyle approached and handed her one of the small purple dopefruit, she raised it to her mouth and mimed the act of eating. Satisfied, the alien departed. She looked around the cave. Her colleagues were devouring the fruit, rapt expressions on their bloated faces.

Corrie lay back, already the act of thinking no longer an impossible labour. She considered the events of the last few days, then remembered her decal and raised her hand. In the failing light of the cave, she made out the illuminated numerals. They still had another 94 days to wait until the arrival of the *Darwinian*.

The next day, Corrie discovered that she was bleeding.

She awoke suddenly from vivid dreams of the firestorm and its aftermath. She sat up and stared around the cave. She no longer felt groggy and distanced, at one remove from the reality around her. She could see clearly and her mind was sharp and alert.

The sound of the Gargoyles, entering the cave on their morning rounds, had awoken her. She watched the aliens as they filed through the farthest entrance and approached Rachel, Imran and the others. She counted twelve Gargoyles, and this time as she watched them she noted the stylized, ritualistic basis of the feeding ceremony. Before, no doubt, she had been too out of it to notice.

Now each alien approached its designated human, made a quick, complicated gesture in the air, and proffered the fruit. Corrie watched Rachel reach out and grab the small, green orb, and stuff it into her mouth.

One by one the humans were fed, and before the Gargoyle bearing her own fruit approached, Corrie knew that again she would simulate the act of eating.

But this time the Gargoyle turned away, before proffering her fruit, and handed it instead to Jake in the neighbouring cell. While the others ate, Corrie sat upright and experienced the irrational feeling of being excluded. Within minutes, the rest of her team had eaten their fill and were sleeping again.

She wondered if the Gargoyles were aware that she had feigned eating her dopefruit last night. Was this why they had declined to feed her this morning? She felt a stab of fear that the aliens were one step ahead of her, knew what she was doing. Also, it occurred to her that she would starve without the sustenance of the fruit.

She stood up and moved towards the cave mouth, and it was only then that she became aware of the dried blood caking her inner thighs and staining the crotch of her leggings. At the same time she felt the pain in her belly. For the past few days, she realized, she'd been so drugged up that she had failed to notice the usual pre-menstrual cramps. There was nothing she could do about it now, short of washing in the river and making herself some kind of makeshift breech cloth.

She left the cave and stepped out into the bright orange morning sunlight. The three Gargoyles were stationed between the caves and the bank of the river, maintaining odd, contorted postures and staring into space.

Corrie hurried down to the river, stripped off her leggings and dunked them in the river. She washed them in the thick, oily water as best she could, then laid them on the sand and waded back into the warm water, aware that she had been wallowing in her own excrement for days in that cave. The water of this infernal planet might not have been all that appetizing, but it served well enough to cleanse the accumulated filth from her body. She submerged herself, luxuriating in the sensation.

Later, she tore a strip of fabric from her shirt, folded it and stuffed it into the gusset of her dried leggings.

No sooner had she returned to the cave than one of the three Gargoyles followed her in and grasped her arm in a sharp, pincer grip. It pulled her from the cave and pushed her away down the shelving incline. The other two aliens joined it before the cave and the three then adopted the statue-still, twisted postures of old.

Corrie watched them, shivering at the touch of the alien's fingers on her upper arm. Clearly, then, she was *persona non grata* in the cave. From now on she would be forced to look after herself, while keeping a close eye on the welfare of the rest of her team. Perhaps it would be for the best. If she could survive until the *Darwinian* returned, she could tell the rescue team where to find the others.

She waded across the river and for the next couple of hours searched the margin of the jungle for edible fruits. She found a couple of the crusty pineapple growths, and a few berries she knew to be just about edible.

By the time she returned to the river and squatted on the bank opposite the limestone caves, another eviction had taken place. She was in time to see one of the Gargoyles escort Rachel from the cave and push her roughly towards the river. The African stumbled, fell. Corrie could hear her cries of anguish, and at the same time as experiencing compassion for the woman, she felt also the pleasure of knowing that she was no longer the only outcast.

She waded into the river and up the other side. Rachel was lying in the sand, semi-conscious and whimpering. She wore only leggings, having discarded her tunic to combat the increased heat of this latitude. Corrie helped her to her feet and half-carried her into the water. They crossed the river and Corrie laid Rachel in the shade of a spreading bush with broad, palmate leaves. She felt safer here, with the river separating them from the Gargoyles.

She lay down beside Rachel and slept.

When she awoke, the sun was setting and the eviction of undesirables from the cave was complete.

She came awake suddenly, wondering where she was. She blinked up at the broad palm leaf above her head, and the events of that morning came back to her. She sat up quickly. Rachel was lying beside her, smiling in greeting.

Corrie reached out and touched her hand. "How're you feeling?"

Rachel sat up, stretching. "Fine, now. I no longer feel..." She shrugged. "Drugged, I suppose."

"Any idea why the Gargoyles evicted you?"

Corrie had assumed that they had thrown *her* from the cave because she had refused to eat the fruit – but Rachel had been compliant, and still she had been evicted.

She shrugged again. "I don't know. One minute I was half-asleep – or rather half-drugged – and then one of the aliens was dragging me from the cave."

Corrie looked up, across the river, and saw two figures – human figures – lying side by side in the sand outside the cave.

Tanya and Sue.

Corrie and Rachel exchanged a glance. "Let's go and get them."

They crossed the river and climbed the incline. The triptych of Gargoyles paid them no heed. Corrie hurried over to the women and knelt beside them. They were half awake, still clearly labouring under the influence of the toxic fruit.

"Wait here," Corrie said. She hurried towards the cave. At any moment she expected the Gargoyles to block her way but it was as if she no longer registered in their perception. She walked into the cave, paused and stared around her. She had not noticed it before, but the place stank of sweat and faeces. The remaining humans – all male, significantly – occupied the cells, semi-comatose and inert.

Quickly Corrie located the water canister attached to Imran's belt, took it and rejoined the others. With Rachel's help she managed to assist Tanya and Sue across the river and into the shade of the palm-analogue.

While Tanya and Sue slept off the effects of the drug, Corrie and Rachel searched the jungle for food and drinkable water. They found a couple of pineapples, and a spring of almost-clear water. Corrie filled the canister and returned to the palm tree.

An hour later, first Tanya and then Sue stirred. Corrie helped Tanya into a sitting position, gave her a drink of spring water. When Sue resurfaced, they sat and ate a meagre meal of oily forest fruit.

Corrie told the others why she had thought, mistakenly, that she had been evicted.

Tanya shook her head. "It had nothing to do with the fact that you refused the fruit," she said. "What do we have in common?"

"Huh?" Corrie shrugged. "What, that we're women?"

Tanya smiled. "Even more basic than that. I mean, how the hell do the Gargoyles know we're women?" She laughed at Corrie's mystified expression. "Look," she went on, pointing to her own crotch. Her leggings were adorned with a bright Rorschach blotch of blood.

Rachel and Sue glanced down, nodded. Living and working so closely together, their periods had fallen pretty much into step with each other.

Corrie said, "Me, too. I washed my leggings in the river. But why...?"

Tanya shrugged. "Would you credit it, we come light years through space and discover the same old prejudices. The Gargoyles evicted us because they thought us unclean, or contaminated, or whatever. Faulty goods."

After a long silence, Corrie said, "So... any ideas about what the hell's happening over there?"

"Perhaps the Gargoyles are simply altruistic," Rachel said. "They saw that we were starving..."

Tanya looked sceptical. "One thing we can be sure of, girl, is that we can't ascribe human motivations to the actions of aliens."

Sue said, "More important than the psychology of the Gargoyles, to be perfectly honest, is how are we going to feed ourselves?"

Corrie stared across the river to the cave-mouths and the trio of immobile aliens. "The simple fact is that we can't survive off what we can get from the jungle – the pineapple things and berries. We've tried that and failed miserably. But we can eat the fruit the Gargoyles provided us with. If we combine the two, ration ourselves to only one fruit a day, then maybe we can make it until the *Darwinian* arrives."

"That's fine in theory," Tanya said, "but how do we get hold of the aliens' precious fruit?"

Corrie shrugged. "We follow the Gargoyles to where they harvest the stuff, wait till they leave, and then help ourselves."

Tanya grunted. "Sounds easy enough..."

Corrie looked up at the sun, calculated. "An hour till sunset," she said. "The Gargoyles fed us at nightfall. Why don't we cross the river and wait until they make a move?"

They waited for 30 minutes, until the sun sank huge and ruddy behind the darkening jungle, and the lightning flicker of the evening's static storm started to dance across the treetops. They waded through the thick, warm waters of the river and climbed the incline of the far bank. Outside the cave they sat, watching the trio of Gargoyles.

Minutes later, from the dark openings of the other caves dotting the limestone bluff, the quick, spry shapes of a dozen Gargoyles emerged and moved off along the bank of the river, heading west.

Corrie nodded to Rachel and the others, and they set off in pursuit.

The Gargoyles moved into the jungle, following a well-worn path. The women followed at a distance, Corrie leading. A little way into the jungle, they came to a clearing. The aliens were gathering fruit from low, ground-hugging bushes and plants. Corrie gestured to the others and they concealed themselves behind a stand of ferns next to the path. As she waited, she imagined following the same routine for the next 90-odd days until the *Darwinian* arrived, sneaking around like the outcasts they were, stealing food from behind the backs of the Gargoyles...

Five minutes later the aliens left the clearing and passed the concealing stand of ferns one by one. Corrie held her breath, her heart hammering loud in her ears, and willed the Gargoyles to pass without seeing them.

As their footfalls diminished, she looked around at the others. Tanya nodded. "We're clear. Let's go."

They stood and hurried along the path to the clearing. There were the bushes bearing the forbidden fruit. Corrie, impatient, hurried across the clearing.

The sudden appearance of the alien beside her almost stopped her heart. It stepped from the trees, looming over her, and darted forward. It thrust its great, prognathous mandibles towards her, hissing something loud and admonitory.

Immediately, other Gargoyles appeared from the jun-

gle, moving around the four cowering women in choreographed sequence all the more discomforting for being not in the least threatening.

Then Corrie felt hard, cold fingers pincer her upper arm, and she was forcibly ejected, along with the others, from the clearing. The Gargoyles escorted the women along the bank of the river and left them on the shelving slope before the caves.

For the first time that day, Corrie felt a pang of hunger. As she watched the aliens file into the humans' cave, a part of her experienced the irrational sensation of envy.

"So what now?" Rachel said. She, too, was staring at the cave.

"We wait till the Gargoyles leave, then go see what we can scrounge."

"From Rube?" Tanya laughed. "The bastard wouldn't let you eat his shit."

"I wasn't thinking about begging from Rube," Corrie said. "Maybe Imran or Jake..."

Tanya said nothing, but tacit in her gaze was the doubt that the men would give them the slightest succour.

Ten minutes later the Gargoyles filed from the cave. If they saw the four women, skulking by the river, they paid them no heed. The aliens repaired to their own caves, dark apertures in the limestone face of the bluff, washed pink now in the light of the setting sun.

Corrie led the way up the incline to the cave. She stepped inside, gagging on the stench. It was a good 30 seconds before her eyes adjusted to the half-light. She made out the men, flat on their backs in their individual cells.

She found Imran and approached.

Tanya was beside her. "Good God," she whispered.

Imran and the others had been stripped naked. It seemed that, in just a day since Corrie had been ejected, the men had gained weight. Their bellies seemed bloated, as well as their limbs. Their bodies glistened with what might have been oil or grease – perhaps some exudation from their diet of fruit? Tanya gagged at the sight and moved to the mouth of the cave.

Corrie knelt beside Imran, found his hand and squeezed. She saw that his eyes were open, watching her.

"Imran, we've been thrown out. Me and Rachel, Tanya and Sue. We need food, Imran."

She glanced around the cell for any sign of discarded or overlooked fruit, found none. "Imran..."

"Corrie..." She had to strain to make out the sound of her name. "Corrie, it's okay. We'll survive. They're taking care of us –"

"Didn't you hear a damned thing I said?" Corrie was close to tears. "They've thrown us out. We have nothing to eat!"

"Corrie, lie down. Take it easy. The aliens will provide..."

"Jesus Christ!" Corrie spat. She moved to where Sue and Rachel were trying to make contact with Jake.

Sue shook her head. "It's no good. They're all the same. They're too far gone."

They scoured the cave for fruit, managed to gather together a few scraps of rind, a discarded kernel. They hurried from the stench of the cave and sat beside the river.

Despite herself, Corrie started to absent-mindedly chew

on the soiled rind. She told herself that she could feel it working on her senses, dulling not only the pain of her hunger, but her fear at what lay ahead. She passed what remained to Rachel, whose expression mixed disgust with the need to eat. She bit tentatively at the hard skin.

"What now?" Tanya said at last.

Corrie let the silence develop. She looked at the decal on the back of her hand. She called up the flight plan of the *Darwinian*, as if it would be any different to the last time she'd checked. They had 93 days to survive before the ship returned.

"We could always leave here," she said. "Trek north, just as we'd planned before. We could look for another clearing marked with standing stones. You never know... Chances are that the Gargoyles excavated more than one foodstore. If we follow the migratory trail, checking for clearings..."

She paused there, looked from Rachel to Tanya and Sue. "Put it this way," she went on. "What do we gain if we stay here? The Gargoyles certainly won't feed us. There isn't much food in the nearby jungle, and this damned heat..."

Rachel shrugged, uncomfortable. "But... I mean, what about the men?"

"The men?" Tanya said, and laughed. She spoke for Corrie when she said: "Fuck the men, Rachel."

They set out in the peachy light of dawn, heading almost due north.

"Keep your eyes peeled," said Corrie, as they walked. "Look out for anything that might be edible, any source of water. We need to take it wherever we find it." None of the artificial distinctions between marching time and foraging time that the men had adopted, she thought to herself. "And if there's any sign of Gargoyles I suggest we get out of sight as fast as possible," she added. "We don't understand them, so we can't go taking unnecessary risks."

The others nodded and Corrie wondered briefly when it was that the consensus had tacitly accepted her leadership. Rachel, Tanya and Sue were each more experienced than Corrie, yet all now turned to her for guidance.

For the first time, she felt her presence on Deneb 5 justified, that she was, as their constitution said, a full and equal member of the expedition and not just Rube's field assistant.

They marched through the heat of the Denebian day.

The going was uneven and slow. After a few kilometres, the trail had petered out into nothing and they were traversing rough jungle terrain. The undergrowth was rarely impenetrable, but Corrie found that she had to use a stick to bat the great cobweb-lianas out of her way, and still she found the stuff clinging to her like a musty body-stocking.

Only three months ago she had been in college, celebrating the end of her training. And now...

"Let's make camp," said Tanya, breaking into Corrie's reverie. As the evening static storm settled around them, they found shelter at the foot of a wide-boled tree with a yielding, fleshy trunk. Corrie found it hard to recall how blasé they had been about these storms until the one that had sparked the forest fire and destroyed their Vulcan

lander.

Now, the dusk storm was a time for shared memories of those they had lost. Corrie reached out a hand to comfort Rachel, but the Somalian turned away, her own grief back to the fore now that her mind was clear of the sedation and dopefruits.

Hundred-kay map, she thought. The comms decal on the back of her wrist showed a low-res map of the region, the image sparking static with the evening storm. There were few features that were of any use to them: the Brown Amazon cutting off one corner of the map, another winding creek to the north. They were still at least a couple of hundred kilometres from their target: the narrow temperate zone, edging steadily south with the advancing cold season. And if Rube's ecofile had been right, there would be more water there, and more chance of edible life-forms.

At their present rate, it would take them at least 20 days to get there. But Corrie knew it wasn't as clear-cut as that: every kilometre further north was a step in the right direction, increasing their chances of survival.

When the storm had passed, they set out again in silence, preferring to keep moving, trying to keep their minds off the growing hunger and thirst.

It was shortly after dawn, two days into their post-captivity journey, that they came upon the clearing.

"Hey," Tanya said, her voice little more than a parched croak. "Looky here, will you?"

Corrie had been off to one side of the track, scouring a thorn bush for what passed for fruit. Now, she stood at Tanya's broad shoulder and looked out from the trees, dazzled by the sudden ruddy sunlight.

For a distance of maybe a hundred metres, the forest parted. In places, trees had been unable to grow where the bedrock rose to the surface, but in others Corrie suspected the bulbous saplings had been cleared.

And there, as her vision returned, Corrie began to determine a form to the outcrops of rock that dotted the clearing. Not outcrops, but free-standing, carved blocks of granite: standing stones!

Heart thumping, Corrie tried to stop herself from running into the clearing. They had to be cautious. What if there were Gargoyles in the vicinity, guarding their migratory food supplies? – even more likely if they had learnt that another such foodstore had been plundered a few tens of kilometres south.

But suddenly Rachel was out there, staggering across the open ground, whimpering like a beaten dog in her desperation for sustenance. Sue and Tanya were not far behind.

Corrie lingered for a few seconds more, squinting in the harsh light for any sign of the sudden, flitting movements of the Gargoyles. There were none.

She stepped out into the open and jogged to catch up with her three companions.

Now that her eyes were accustomed to the light, she saw that this storage place was much larger than the one they had found before. It should easily sustain them for the remaining 90 days until the return of the *Darwinian*.

But... there was something wrong.

Up ahead, Tanya and Sue were on their knees by one of the pits at the foot of a towering granite menhir.

As she approached, Corrie heard a plaintive sobbing, but it did not come from either of the women she could see. She stopped by the pit and looked down. Rachel was in there, two metres down, her body racked with grief.

Corrie opened her mouth to speak, but there were no words to counter her friend's distress. The stone pit had been emptied.

She turned away. Ten metres on, she came to a second standing stone and, at its foot, a second denuded pit.

She spent the next 30 minutes going from stone to stone, but every pit had been emptied of its contents.

Later, the sun towering in the morning sky, they sat by the first pit.

"You're the ecologist," Tanya said to Corrie. "What do you reckon?"

Corrie shook her head. "If these pits were foodstores set aside for the migratory period, as we thought," she said, "then why are they empty? We've come further north. The cold season should be more advanced—"

"Not that you'd notice," Sue interrupted, indicating the glowering alien sun.

"But if the season's more advanced here," Corrie continued, "then they should be *better* prepared for the migration, not totally unprepared."

"Perhaps they use it earlier," said Rachel, tentatively. "Perhaps they need longer to prepare."

"But the cold season won't hit here for a while yet," said Corrie. "Surely this is too early."

"Who knows?" said Tanya. "Like we said before, though: they're aliens – how can we possibly hope to understand them on the basis of so little information and analysis?"

"Survival," said Rachel, softly. "That's what it's all about now. Surviving 'til the *Darwinian* comes back for us."

They found the trail that led them to a second Gargoyle settlement heading away from the north-west corner of the clearing.

"What do you reckon?" said Tanya.

Corrie looked at the trail, and then at the encroaching jungle to either side: its gloomy interior tangled with scrubby undergrowth and heavy with dusty, cobwebbed lianas.

Corrie shrugged. "Keep your eyes peeled," she said, gesturing towards the trail. "We'll get more distance under our belt in the open."

Ten-kay map, she thought, and her decal showed her a map of the area. A small river sliced through the centre of the map. If the trail held its north by north-west course, they would have to ford the waterway in about five kilometres. She hoped it would be a shallow, slow-moving river, like the one by the first settlement.

That first settlement had been a similar distance from the foodstore they had plundered. A pattern, perhaps...

Moving at the pace of their slowest member – Rachel, limping as the result of jumping into that first empty foodpit – the party approached the river two and a half

hours later.

Corrie had time for a little personal hygiene as she walked, picking at the plaques on her exposed shoulders and back, using clawed fingers to rake sticky liana-debris from her hair. She was looking forward to getting into the river to clean the last caked blood from her body and clothing.

A steady, trudging rhythm descended on the four women as they headed north, intent on survival. There was a deep ache in the pit of Corrie's stomach, something that had gone way beyond hunger and become almost a part of her psyche.

A movement cut through her numbed state of consciousness and instantly Corrie signalled to the others and side-stepped into the undergrowth. It had been a movement that somehow combined suddenness with an agile, alien fluidity.

They hid for several minutes until a dark, improbably thin, tall figure darted across Corrie's field of view, followed by another seconds later.

A few minutes after that, she stepped from the undergrowth and peered along the trail. Two Gargoyles stood stock still about a hundred metres away. The women lingered in the shadows until, finally, with perfect co-ordination, the Gargoyles twisted through 180 degrees, from the head down, and darted away along the trail.

After a further half-kay, the trail opened out as the ground fell away towards the river, the exposed golden sandstone cut through by a sequence of meandering rills and gullies.

At first, Corrie didn't see the settlement, but then she realised that some of the gullies had been roofed over with felled trees to form artificial caverns that faced out across the river.

"It's a settlement," she hissed to the others, leading them aside into the undergrowth. "Just like the first one."

"What do we do?" asked Tanya. "How do we get round it?"

Corrie looked at her three companions. Each had deteriorated rapidly over the course of their latest trek. Rachel and Sue were struggling simply to keep moving, and even Tanya – broad-shouldered, buxom Tanya Chernenkova – seemed like a ghosted image of the woman Rube had mentally undressed at every opportunity.

"We don't," Corrie said, slowly, trying to figure out the idea that was taking form in her mind. "Think of the first settlement: they had a supply of the dopefruit, didn't they? They didn't have it just for us."

"But they guarded it," Tanya said.

"They guarded the orchard area where they harvested the stuff," Corrie said. "But it was easy enough to get in and out of the caves once we'd been outcast, wasn't it? It was as if we no longer existed. Maybe they'll have some supplies in these caves."

"So we just walk right in...?"

"Not quite," Corrie said, grinning. "Not quite."

Just as Corrie had suspected when she first saw the settlement, the sequence of artificial caverns all faced out across the river's flood basin. There were signs here of violent water-flow – the outpourings of melting glaciers, Cor-

rie supposed. It had carved the rills through the sandstone embankment which the Gargoyles had roofed over, and it had scooped out the great river basin that, at present, was only graced with the slightest of turbid trickles at its core.

Rachel and Sue had needed little persuasion to wait in the jungle while Tanya and Corrie reconnoitred. About 50 metres from where the sandstone embankment tumbled down towards the river basin, the jungle proper opened out and thinned. A few meagre tongues of scrubby growth lapped the open ground and the two women worked their way along one of these.

About ten metres from the edge of the embankment, they reached bare ground. Side by side, they crawled across on hands and knees until they could lie belly down and stare out across the settlement.

It was a scene quite unlike the previous settlement. Small groups of Gargoyles were frozen in their now-familiar half-observant, half-stupefied postures, but elsewhere some of the beings lay basking in the afternoon sun with almost cat-like ease. And there were what appeared to be young Gargoyles, too: smaller aliens, flitting about the open space like gnats over a stagnant pool. In short, there was a domestic atmosphere to this settlement that had been altogether absent from the first settlement.

"It's the season," Tanya said, answering Corrie's unspoken question. "This colony is further through the cycle, just as you said they would be as we move north. They've bred, it's a more mature settlement, getting through the seasonal cycle before the winter zone moves south again."

"Come on," Corrie said. "We're not field scientists now: we're looking for food." She backed away from the embankment.

Back in the undergrowth, they worked their way along to the first roofed-over section of gully, as far back from the river basin as possible. They weren't, as Tanya had suggested, just going to walk into the caverns: they were going in through the roof.

The roof material had been sliced from the fleshy limbs of some kind of tree. The stuff was tough and rubbery and, Corrie suspected, would put up pretty good resistance to even a laser cutter if they'd had one to hand. But it was flexible and elastic, and she found it quite easy to twist away a flap of the material and peer down into the gloomy interior of the cavern. The musty faecal smell was quite overpowering and, hanging with her head suspended into the opening, she had to fight not to gag.

It took a few seconds for her eyes to adjust, and in that time she expected at any moment to feel cold, twiggy fingers closing around her head, hauling her down into the cave. But it didn't happen. Instead, she found that she could make out bulky shapes in the gloom.

She was looking into a cavity, hollowed out from a natural cleft in the rock. There was a bulbous shape at the far end and, for a chilling instant, she thought that somehow they had completed a full circle and come back to the original settlement and this was Rube or Jake or Imran wallowing in their own self-centred filth.

But no. She knew that wasn't true. And, in any case, the smell was not a human one. It was animal, something like the fetid mustiness of a fruit bat colony she

had once studied in Irian Jaya.

"Keep your eyes peeled for me: I'm going to take a look."

Corrie twisted so that her legs dangled through the opening, and then she wriggled her torso through the gap and dropped into the gloom.

The thing in the far end of the cell made a slight peeping sound, but otherwise showed no reaction to Corrie's intrusion. She approached it, hesitantly. The thing was just a mound of flesh, fully two metres round, almost a perfect sphere. Somewhere, near the summit, there was a protrusion that may have been a head, and to either side were folds of blubber that may have served as some kind of limbs.

She touched it.

Its flesh quivered, was cold, its surface slick with exuded oil. What it reminded her of most was some kind of bizarre cross between a seal and the oily, fleshy trees of the dry jungle.

And also, it reminded her of the men they had left behind, although clearly this thing had not the slightest trace of humanity about it.

She snapped herself out of her reverie. It was as if the musty scent in the air was doping her. In the gloom, she searched about the cell, found a few meagre scraps of food: discarded, shrivelled rinds, a few rubbery, dried-up gobbets of fruit-flesh, dropped out of reach of the cell's occupant.

She stepped from the cell, into another similar one. Its occupant, too, wallowed at one end of its filthy domicile, and here she found more scraps of food, even a small number of untouched dopefruit littering the floor.

She swallowed the juices welling up in her dried out mouth. She knew she must fight the desperate urge to bite into one of these discarded fruit. She had to keep her wits about her, had to get back to the others.

Gathering her booty into a fold in the shirt knotted at her waist, Corrie passed through the cell's narrow opening.

There was a sudden, high-pitched shriek and cool fingers closed around her arms. Chitinous mandibles flashed before her face, and the red ember glow of Gargoyle eyes.

Then she was on her rear, feet kicking feebly, as the Denebian dragged her through the cavern, one long-fingered hand wrapped around her arm, another tangled in her hair.

A sudden glare of sunlight, and then her feet lifted clear from the ground and she was, briefly, flying through the hot, dry air.

Then she struck the dirt in a crumpled, bone-shocked heap.

She drew breath, nearly choking on the dust kicked up in the air around her. She peered through slitted eyes, and through the settling dust clouds she could see a Gargoyle, poised statue-like a few metres away. She couldn't be sure if it was the one that had ejected her from the cavern. She looked around, and worked out that she was in the clearing she and Tanya had observed from the top of the embankment. There were other Gargoyles nearby, some in frozen repose, others flitting about, yet others lying spreadeagled, basking in the sun.

And then she realized that some of the figures they had taken for sun-bathers were, in fact, withered, almost mum-

mified corpses. These figures were smaller than the Gargoyles with which she had become familiar, their bodies stocky and short-limbed. There was something about them that recalled the grossly bloated figures occupying the cells.

She rolled onto her side and slowly rose to a squatting position.

None of the Gargoyles appeared to be paying her any attention. She jogged across the clearing to where a trail climbed the edge of the embankment and soon she was back in the jungle fringe, working her way across to where the others would be waiting.

"Don't you see?" she said to Tanya, Rachel and Sue, when they had retreated into the jungle and she had described what had happened. "This is the Gargoyles in their natural state. This is how they would have been if we hadn't somehow interrupted their natural cycle."

"But what *are* they – these creatures in the caves?"

"Their society has two castes," Corrie said. "They lay out the foodstores in the jungle for this elite caste and then, when the stores are exhausted, they round the elite up and take them back to the caverns to look after them. We stumbled upon that foodstore and the Gargoyles somehow took us for members of their elite caste and took us back to their settlement."

"What about the corpses?"

"I don't know. Maybe they weed out the ones with diseases or some kind of flaw. They took our menstrual bleeding as a sign of disease and cast us out, just as they cast out any of their own with comparable signs of weakness."

They headed north again, sticking to their reasoning that survival would be more feasible in the temperate zone. Corrie waited until that night before telling the others that she was carrying a few scraps of dopefruit.

Gathered in the root-hollow at the base of a large, broken-limbed tree, they shared out the pieces of fruit she had managed to scavenge. The first bite sent digestive juices scorching painfully up her gullet in anticipation. The second sent a sense of mellow well-being seeping through her body.

Soon the food was gone and for the first time in days Corrie felt sated. Tanya and Sue were curled up in each other's arms, asleep already. Corrie turned to Rachel, brushed her lips across her friend's cheek and slumped against her, asleep before either of them hit the ground.

Nine days later, they found the third set of standing stones.

There were fewer this time, 19 of them, and they were smaller. Corrie wondered if the Denebian tribes had some kind of class structure, with the tribes ranked according to the size and number of their standing stones. Perhaps, but xentropology wasn't her field. That made her think of Imran, and for the first time in days she wondered what was happening to the men they had left behind.

The pits here were empty, as they had anticipated. In unspoken consensus, the four women followed the trail that led roughly northwards away from the standing stones. Corrie consulted her map and saw that a small river crossed their path about seven kays due north. If

this followed the pattern of the first two finds, that would mark the location of a Gargoyle settlement.

They camped out in the jungle about a kilometre short of the river.

Corrie took first watch, as the other three slept. In the dark confines of the jungle, "watch" was really an inappropriate term: she listened instead. By now she was familiar with the night-time sounds of the jungle, the occasional rustles and calls of nocturnal creatures, the usually distant whoops and hollers of the agile lizard-like creatures that inhabited the high canopy of the forest.

She drank from the flask, filled from a nearby dew-pond formed in the hollowed-out horizontal limb of a tree. It was cooler at night now, and the air moister, which meant that thirst, at least, was not the problem it had been further south.

And then she heard the scream.

It sounded like a baby... a baby in intense pain. The kind of agonized wail that cuts right through to any human with the merest scrap of empathy.

She shook herself. The sound had only lasted for an instant, and now she wondered if she had somehow imagined it, some kind of aural hallucination. Something in the water, perhaps.

She was just beginning to relax when she heard it again, lasting a full two seconds.

"What is it?" Tanya was at her side.

"I don't know," said Corrie. "But it's coming from where I think the settlement will be. And it's bad – I know that much, for sure."

They approached the settlement in the grey twilight hours before dawn. The screams had lasted well into the previous night and even when they had subsided none of the women could settle again.

They knew they were nearing the settlement when they heard the steady sobbing drifting towards them from up ahead.

The women exchanged glances as they edged cautiously through the undergrowth towards the growing lightness of the forest fringe.

They came to the river first, a muddy, slow-moving ribbon of slime about ten metres wide. Across the water was a wide, gravelly shelf, a riverine beach enfolded by a great, lazy loop of river. And beyond this area, the land rose in a low cliff-face dotted with the openings of caves, much as Corrie had expected to see.

But she had not anticipated the tableau laid out on the gravel clearing. Strewn like beached jellyfish across the stones were the hulking, bloated bodies of the Denebians Corrie had previously thought of as an "elite caste." But what culture would treat its elite in such a manner?

The beasts had been hauled from their caverns, and that alone must have been responsible for some of the damage Corrie saw before her.

The bodies had been flayed – skinned alive. The great hulks lay quivering, sobbing and groaning in the heat of the rising sun. Vivid red trails led from each massed body back to the cave-mouths, scraps of what must have been skin flapping in the breeze, stripped from the bodies as

they were dragged out into the open.

Had all of these creatures been cast out for some reason, had they all been rejected as, first Corrie, and then the other three women had been? Did some remain in the caverns?

But no. As Corrie stared, unbelieving, she recognized the flitting movements of the Gargoyles, up by the caves. Clearly, they had not yet finished with their tortured captives.

They moved so fast!

An instant after she had seen them emerging from the caves, some of the Gargoyles were down by their mounded charges in the open. Even as she watched, one of them skipped up onto a flayed torso and was down on the ground again, holding another scrap of skin aloft. A piercing, baby-cry tore through the morning air a split-second later.

Corrie turned away.

"What are they *doing*?" she gasped.

Tanya shook her head, still watching. "Some kind of ritualized torture and massacre. Maybe we were wrong all along: it's not a caste system, but some kind of intensive farming. Maybe they've been fattening these creatures up for harvest."

Corrie remembered the pathetic corpses she had seen at the previous colony. "No," she said. Although they had physical differences, there was a definite continuity of features between the Gargoyles, the rejected creatures cast out from the caves to die, and the bloated forms being tortured here today. "They're the same species."

"Cannibalism, then," Sue said. "They eat some of their own in order to survive the coming winter season."

Corrie steeled herself for another look.

Out across the river, the settlement had come alive with the early morning sun. The beach was swarming with Gargoyles.

"Something's going on," she said. The Gargoyles were strapping great belts of twisted liana around the mounds of blubber. Soon, every one of them was harnessed and teams of Gargoyles lined up to haul on the straps.

Instantly, a chorus of wails broke through the air,

The things started to move, slithering across the gravel, lubricated by their own seeping body juices.

"How long before they invent the wheel?" Tanya muttered darkly, at Corrie's shoulder.

They followed them. There was something gruesomely compelling about the spectacle.

They had to find out what was happening, Corrie told herself. They had to understand this world if they were to survive.

The first of the haulage teams reached the river. They waded through, and soon their harnessed charge followed, half-floating in the thick water.

They emerged on the near side, and set out at a grindingly slow pace along the trail Corrie and her companions had followed the previous day.

The journey took most of the day. Deneb hung low and red in the evening sky by the time the first team of Gargoyles entered the clearing of standing stones.

They stopped by one of the stones, and suddenly it was a free-for-all, with Gargoyles swarming over their stu-

pefied charges.

"It's not cannibalism," said Corrie, slowly, as the women looked on in horror. "They're fucking the things."

"You mean..."

"This is how they treat their females," Corrie said, and it all started to fall into place. "The males are migratory, the things we've been calling Gargoyles. Every winter they head south, and every spring they return to the northern breeding grounds."

"And the females," Rachel said, "spend the winter underground. The males dig them up, fatten them up –"

"They must give birth some time," Tanya said. "We saw children at the last colony."

"Then they bring them back to the burial grounds, impregnate them and bury them again for the winter. The females pupate underground and then, when it's time to go through the breeding cycle, they emerge again."

"And that's why they took us in!" said Tanya. "When they came back to their burial ground, instead of the reincarnated females they had expected, they found strange-looking humans around the empty pits – just as if we'd hatched out! We looked weird, but we were about the right size and we had the right number of limbs..."

Corrie looked at her companions. "And if they've reached this stage here, then this is what's going to happen further south, too," she said. "Up here we're further through the cycle, but soon..." She stopped, staring at the others.

"We have to go back and get the men out," Rachel said.

Tanya shook her head. "They made their choice," she said. "They chose to stay there, even if it meant turning us away for fear that we'd threaten their pampered existence. It was them who cast us out, every bit as much as the Gargoyles had. And now they have to pay the consequences."

"But we can't just leave them to... to *that*," Corrie said.

"We've seen that you were right about conditions further north," said Tanya. "Already there's more water available, the oils in the fruits are less intense. The storms are milder, too. If we stay up here we have every chance of surviving until the *Darwinian* returns. I say we go on."

A vote. After all this time of unspoken consensus between the four women, Tanya was calling a vote.

"We have to go back," said Corrie.

Rachel nodded quickly.

They turned to Sue who, in turn, looked at Tanya.

Tanya slumped. "Okay," she conceded. "I bow to the consensus. We go back, and if we get there in time we rescue the sons of bitches."

They pushed themselves hard, knowing that every hour gained might be the hour before the Gargoyles went into rut and dragged their breeding stock out to the standing stones.

They reached the second Gargoyle colony in step with the advancing season: as they approached, they heard the anguished wails of bloated females being hauled from their growing chambers for their final journeys.

The women didn't pause. They kept going, trying to put the awful sound as far behind them as possible.

"We have to speed up," said Corrie, over and over, mostly to herself.

She tried and tried, but couldn't work out how they

might rescue the men, who would almost certainly be too drugged and bloated to move.

She was realistic enough to know that they could never hope to rescue all nine. But even if they only managed to rescue one or two, that would be something. The expedition had been a complete disaster, but five or six survivors was better than four.

How would they decide who to rescue, she pondered over and again? It would almost certainly be dictated by chance, she knew. Even if chance dictated it to be Rube, though?

They would have made it, if it hadn't been for the storm.

Almost delirious with fatigue, hunger and thirst, the four women marched south into the territory of the first Gargoyle colony.

Corrie didn't recognize it, but her comms decal told her that they were close. Over and over, she tried to comm the men, but there was no response. Either they were too late already, or the men were simply too blitzed to respond.

And now another dry storm was kicking up, and her decal was snowstorming with static, making any communication impossible.

The sky was alive with sheets of blue lightning, the air fizzing with electricity. There was a sudden blast, and Corrie staggered, somehow stayed on her feet.

She smelt smoke.

The lightning had struck a nearby tree and now its oily sap was sizzling, small flames lapping around its trunk, fingering their way into its oily crevices, finding sustenance, spreading, leaping higher.

"Come on," Corrie gasped, her dry throat aching. Rachel and Sue looked ready to collapse. Their faces were hollowed with hunger, their eyes shadowed and sunken. Corrie and Tanya exchanged glances, then each took hold of one of their companions and half-supported, half-dragged them away from the spreading fire.

They managed, but a short distance ahead another wall of flames cut across the trail.

Fire ahead, fire behind. They were trapped.

Tanya was smacking the back of her wrist, as if that would free her comms decal of interference from the storm.

Suddenly, Corrie recognized their surroundings. She put a hand on Tanya's arm, and gestured through the trees to her left.

"A river," she mouthed. She remembered Rube's invitation: *Come on, Corrie. What have you got to hide?* She remembered him stripping off, the obscene growths of plaques cut off in a neat line where the waistband of his pants had been. The lily-white flesh below, the bulbous lumps of his genitalia waving about, half-engorged, below, as he advanced on her. *Come on, babe. We're just two humans together.* Meaty hands reaching out towards her as Corrie found herself rooted to the spot. Fingers hooked inside the fastening at the front of her shirt, pulling downwards, scaly skin brushing her flesh. *What have you got to lose, babe?* And then it was over. She'd backed away, cried something at him, and he'd laughed and backed into the river.

Fucking dyke, he'd called her, then, and side-stroked out into the open water.

Now, Tanya and Corrie dragged their two companions through the trees to the river and plunged in. The water revived Rachel and Sue, and the four women waded farther out. Corrie leaned forward into the water's oily embrace, gave herself to it, breast-stroked out into the middle and turned to watch the forest burn.

They found the abandoned settlement in the early hours of the next day. The Gargoyle males must have either perished in the inferno, or set off, already, on their southward migration.

What, then, of their honorary "females"?

The others were too exhausted to go on, but Corrie had to see. She forced herself along the trail. One foot, then the other, then the first again. Every step a victory over weariness and starvation.

Suddenly there were standing stones all around her. She must have been on autopilot, just one step, then another. She looked around.

No sign of the Gargoyles. No sign that anything had happened here. She made her way to the nearest stone. The pit wasn't there.

Or rather... it had been filled, covered over.

She turned through 360 degrees, bewildered, trying to get her bearings. Took one staggering step, and suddenly the ground gave way beneath her foot and she was plunging downwards.

But her landing was soft, yielding.

She was lying perhaps two metres below ground level, the dim sunlight picking out the chamber's walls, glistening viscously.

She tried to move, but she was enfolded in the same soft, yielding substance that comprised the walls of the pit. She sank back into its sticky embrace, laughing feebly.

Something caught her eye, then, glinting feebly in the morning light. She reached out, hooked a finger round a sliver of metal, a chain. A necklace, with a horn of plenty pendant suspended from it. Rube's chain...

She sank back in the gloop.

She didn't know what they did to their females to liquefy them like this; it must be part of the preservation process, she supposed. Rube would have had an explanation.

Her stomach was grumbling, digestive juices burning deep in her belly. At least, she thought, Rube still had a useful part to play in the expedition, after all.

She raised her comm to her lips. "Rachel..." she began.

Weakly, Tanya replied, "Corrie, where are you?"

Corrie smiled to herself, said, "Tanya, I think we're going to be okay."

And then she opened her mouth and let the first of the sweet, bloody meat seep in...

Keith Brooke & Eric Brown have contributed many independently written stories to these pages, as well as several previous collaborations: "Appassionata" (#109), "Sugar and Spice" (#112), "Under Antares" (#126) and "The Flight of the *Oh Carrollian*" (#145). Keith lives nowadays in Brightlingsea, Essex, and Eric lives still in Haworth, West Yorkshire.



10 National SF Awards
3 Aurealis Awards
Major International Acclaim

...the most important magazine of SF, Fantasy & Horror

EIDOLON

...the most important magazine of SF, Fantasy & Horror

www.eidolon.net

Eidolon Publications
PO Box 226
NORTH PERTH WA 6906
AUSTRALIA

Four year subscription
\$23 Air \$19 Surface
subtract \$2.50 if cheque
(money is in AUD\$)

The first 30 new subscriptions
to mention this offer will win a free
Australian SF collection
from the Publisher

EIDOLON
The Australian Science Fiction and Fantasy
Magazine

Issue 28 1999

Is science fiction a written or a visual medium? I sometimes wonder. I used to think it started with the written word, but those words conjured images in my mind, far different from mainstream literature. In sf I had to use my imagination more in order to picture what the author was creating. The success of sf films over the last 20 years, now that they've mastered special effects, suggests that the visual aspects are taking over from the written – maybe they already had 60 years ago when the comic books emerged.

This question came back to me recently when looking through the delightful *Science Fiction of the 20th Century* by Frank Robinson (Portland, Oregon: Collector's Press, 1999) priced at \$59.95. This is a follow-up to *Pulp Culture* (Collector's Press, 1998; \$39.95) compiled by Robinson with Lawrence Davidson. Both books are a feast of visual splendour. Both display hundreds of covers of pulp magazines, though *Science Fiction of the 20th Century* also includes digest magazines, slicks, paperbacks and hardcovers from across this century.

Books purporting to be sf histories but consisting primarily of magazine and book covers with a modicum of text aren't new. Back in the 1970s there was a flurry of them, encouraged by the success of *One Hundred Years of Science Fiction Illustration* by Anthony Frewin (Jupiter Books, 1974). In no time at all we were deluged in similar books: *The Science Fiction Book* by Franz Rottensteiner (Thames & Hudson, 1975), *2000 A.D.: Illustrations from the Golden Age of Science Fiction Pulp* by Jacques Sadoul (Regnery, 1975), *Fantastic Science-Fiction Art* by Lester del Rey (Ballantine, 1975), *A Pictorial History of Science Fiction* by David Kyle (Hamlyn, 1976), and its follow-up *The Illustrated Book of Science Fiction Ideas & Dreams* (Hamlyn, 1977). The success of Frewin's book also caused New English Library to finalize arrangements over their proposed sf poster magazine, *Science Fiction Monthly* in 1974, and they commissioned Brian Aldiss to produce what has to be one of the most ungainly and opportunistic of any of these books, *Science Fiction Art* (1975). It also sparked interest in a degree of pseudo-intellectualism in sf criticism, with art books masquerading as encyclopedias, such as *The Visual Encyclopedia of Science Fiction* by Brian Ash (Pan, 1977) and *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction* by Robert Holdstock (Octopus, 1978).

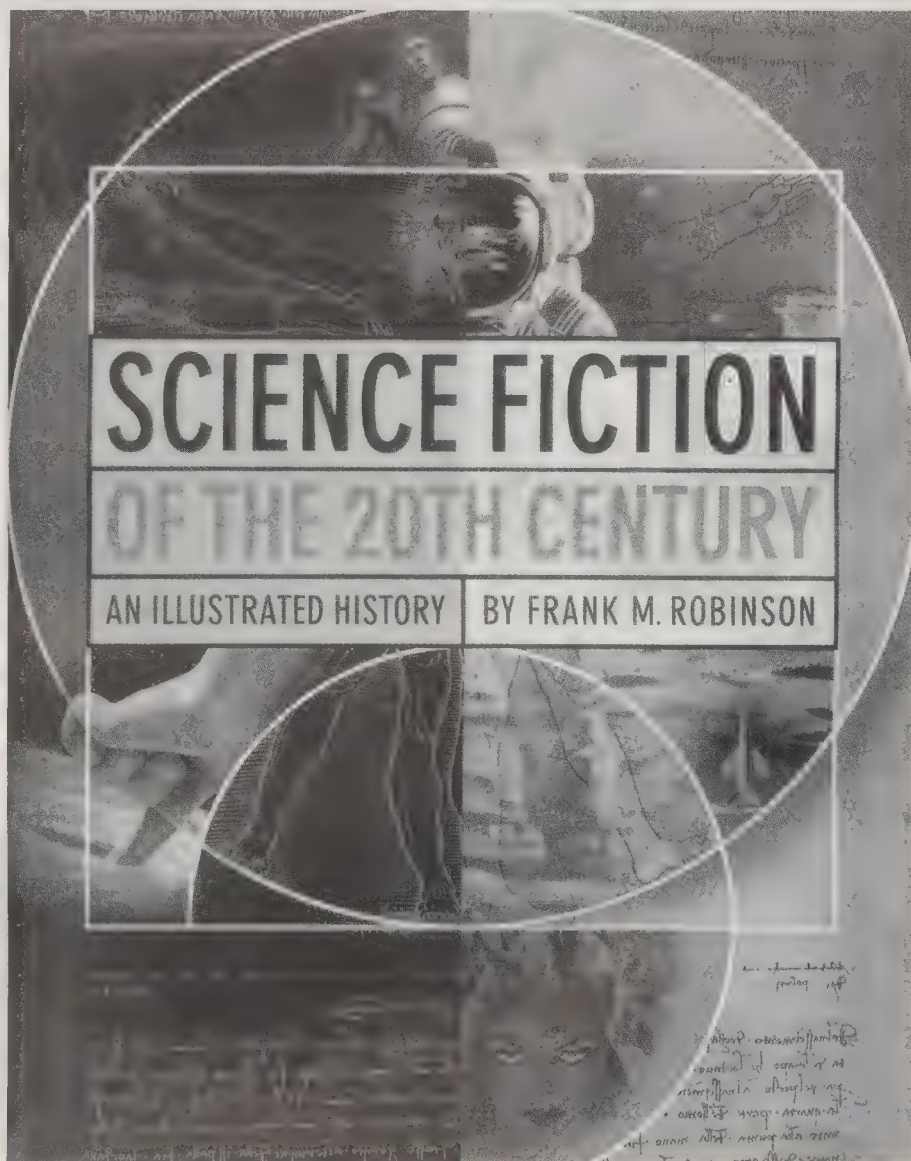
The glut led to the usual waning of interest and by the end of the 1970s things settled down. There have been plenty of sf art books since, but most of them have specialized on artists or

Science Fiction of the 20th Century, or SF in Cinemascope

Mike Ashley

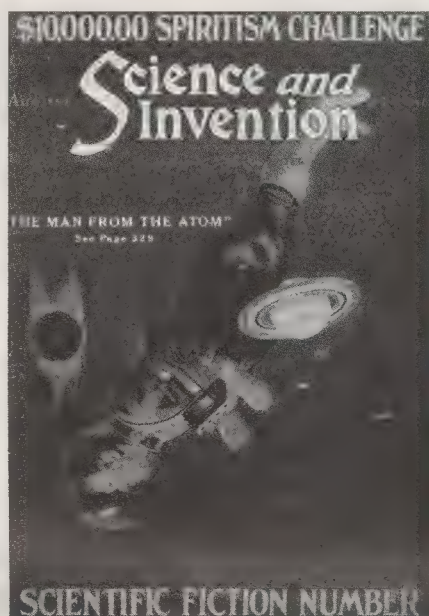


REVIEWED



specific subjects, like the very excellent *Spectrum* series by Cathy and Arnie Fenner or *Infinite Worlds* by Vincent di Fate (Virgin, 1997). But in recent years there has been a return to magazine and paperback art, only this time it is fuelled by the interest of collectors. Some of this has spilled over from the comic-book field. We have had, for instance, *The Illustrated History of Science Fiction Comics* by Mike Benton (Taylor, 1992), part of the *Taylor History of Comics*. In the wider sense we have had *Pulp Art* by Robert Lesser (Random House, 1997), and into that territory fit both *Pulp Culture* and *Science Fiction of the 20th Century*.

So, what does this book offer that hasn't already been covered by all these others? Two words help define it – quality and thoroughness. Of all the books listed above only David Kyle's made any attempt to follow through the history and development of sf in a methodical way. His two books were essentially thematic. Robinson's is a straight history, and the emphasis is on the sf medium, not sf as literature. And it's big. It's a large-format book (34cm x 26cm) running to 256 pages, so there's plenty of room for both illustrations and text. In fact Robinson's text runs to about 30,000 words, so is substantial without being detailed. The first chapter gives us some pre-Gernsback history. It looks at the popular magazines – especially the Munsey pulps with some early sci-



ence-fiction covers. Then it charts the rise and fall of the magazines. Over half of the book takes us through the main magazines, chapter by chapter – *Amazing Stories*, the *Wonder* stable, *Astounding/Analog*, *F&SF*, *Galaxy* and just about all of the lesser magazines. I haven't made a checklist but there aren't many magazines not pictured with at least one cover. Robinson then moves on to paperbacks and hardcovers and rounds out the volume with some films. The covers are gloriously reproduced in far better quality

and detail than I have ever previously seen. Some covers look even better than the originals.

Of course, magazine and book covers alone may give you a flavour of the shape and look of sf, but you can't understand their history from them. So, all of this is accompanied by a lively and often personalized history of the magazines. Robinson has been around for most of these years. He was born in the year *Amazing Stories* was launched. He joined Ziff-Davis as an office boy in 1944, sold his first story in 1950, his first novel in 1956, and pretty much ushered in the disaster technothriller with *The Glass Inferno* (1974), written with Thomas Scortia and filmed as *The Towering Inferno* (1974). All this time he was amassing a formidable collection of magazines – not just sf. He knows his material and comes to it with no pretensions. Robinson has nothing to prove, and the text flows and rolls effortlessly through the highways and byways of sf. He drops in anecdotes and thoughts to lighten the history and the whole book is a delight and an ease to read. It is by its nature superficial – you can't cover sf of the 20th century in 30,000 words, and Robinson doesn't try to. This book is aimed at collectors who want to know the context and scale of the field and fans who love to wallow in the medium. So while you won't learn much more about sf than in all of the books listed earlier (apart from this book being 20 years more up to date) you will get a very broad tapestry where the text and art work together to provide a panoramic view.

And the covers are splendid. Like no other, this book is a timely reminder of the exceptional quality of sf artwork, especially in recent years. We may fondly remember the early artists, like Frank R. Paul or Earle K. Bergey (neither of whom I particularly liked) or Howard Brown or Virgil Finlay or Lawrence Stevens or even Ed Emshwiller and Kelly Freas (all of whom I treasure). But here we also get to see a wide range of modern artists – Vaughn Bode, Bob Eggleton, Rick Berry, Mike Whelan, Wayne Barlowe, Don Maitz, Val Lakey, Tom Cauty, David Mattingly... It really is a celebration of sf art.

Although this book is a delight on its own, it's even better when taken in tandem with the earlier *Pulp Culture*. Here Robinson and Davidson gave a superb illustrated history of the fiction magazines, of which sf formed but one chapter. Between the two volumes, therefore, you not only see the wide spectrum of sf but you see it within the context of the magazine field. Best of all, to my mind, is that *SF of the 20th Century* doesn't sensationalize the field. It doesn't concentrate on



monsters and maidens and rayguns and all the iconography of "sci-fi." It reveals the whole picture, warts and all, but generally shows that as the sf medium has developed so too has the artwork. Science fiction today has some of the best artists working in the field. In fact it always has – they just get better and better.

This is the kind of book to show to people who scoff at sf. The artwork will captivate them, I have no doubt about that, and it may even make them wonder what kind of fiction inspired such incredible artwork. You don't need to like sf to like this book, but it will lure you into its web.

And has it helped answer my ques-

tion as to whether sf is a written or visual medium? Yes – it has to be both. You cannot separate one from the other. The story gives you the images, but the images create the story. It's a bonding of two art forms, and perhaps that's the real legacy of science fiction of the 20th century.

Mike Ashley

In the beginning, it seemed very simple. There was William Gibson banging out *Neuromancer* on his now legendary manual typewriter; there was Bruce Sterling and Lewis Shiner in Texas, writers known mostly for their short stories, firing acerbic potshots at sedentary mid-80s sf with their zine *Cheap Truth*. Gardner Dozois gave the nascent movement a name, borrowed from a short story by Bruce Bethke. *Neuromancer*, published in 1984, won just about every sf award going; Sterling gave old-fashioned space opera a sharp new edge with the highly influential *Schismatrix* and edited the *Mirrorshades* anthology which for a time defined the sub-genre; Shiner increasingly edged towards the mainstream, with novels (*Slam*, *Glimpses*) coloured more by a rock'n'roll rather than science-fictional sensibility, and declared, in an op-ed piece for *The New York Times*, that cyberpunk was dead.

Well, of course, it wasn't; nor is it now. But like an aging star, the cyberpunk movement has burned less brightly and its influence has grown more and more diffuse as it has expanded outwards. Its narrative metaphors have long ago leaked beyond the embattled boundaries of sf – most notably, of course, the concept of cyberspace – and core sf has incorporated its tropes as decorative baubles or plot coupons without regard for their original rhetorical force; but the original cyberpunk sensibility is still at work wherever sf engages directly with the real world rather than with the husks of its past glories. And what of Sterling? What of Gibson?

Still writing novels, of course: still writing sf novels, in fact. Here are their latest.

Bruce Sterling's *Distraction* (Bantam, \$23.95; a UK edition is rumoured to be out from Orion, but we haven't seen it), like his previous novel, *Holy Fire*, is set in a 21st century in which society has been shattered by genetic engineering and information technology. The US government is virtually bankrupt, has declared a permanent state of emergency, and is fighting a cold war with Holland. Anglos are an ethnic minority. Half the population is not in formal employment and many are nomads, "people who had rallied in a

horde and marched right off the map. They had tired of a system that offered them nothing, so they had simply invented their own."

Oscar Valparaiso, a Boston millionaire, is very much of the system, but trying to come to terms with the new reality. As campaign manager, he has just helped an idealistic architect win a seat in the US Senate, but Oscar is something of a political embarrassment because he is not quite human, being a genetically-engineered product of a Mafia baby farm. And so the grateful Senator Bambakias sends Oscar and his Krewe of secretaries, aides, fashion consultants and security officers as far away from Washington as possible, to the Collaboratory, a Federally-funded

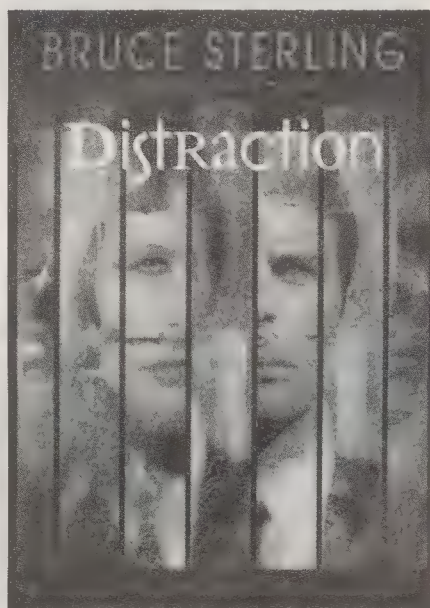
biological engineering facility in a remote corner of Senator Bambakias's constituency, on the border between East Texas and Louisiana, where Oscar regroups and begins to plan his comeback.

Fast-paced, crackling with energy, wit and intelligence, *Distraction's* screwball plot, knowing burlesques, and ironic juxtapositions and inversions match the intensity of Pohl and Kornbluth's classic 1950s satires such as *The Space Merchants* and *Gladiator-at-Law*. Oscar is an engaging hero, insanely optimistic, smart and manipulative, ravenously curious about human behaviour, and growing increasingly frantic as he tries to keep his schemes together while everything spins into chaos around him. Like the nearby Air Force base, which is forced to hold roadblock bake-sales to fund itself, the Collaboratory is desperately short of funds, and run by the placemen of the corrupt Senator whom Oscar's candidate defeated. Oscar engineers a revolution within the Collaboratory, elevating to the position of director a Nobel Prize-winning neurologist with whom he has, inconveniently, fallen in love, and brings in an army of nomads to help fight off the flamboyant governor of Louisiana, Green Huey, who needs the Collaboratory to further his plans to secede from the USA and establish a "BioBayou." Meanwhile, Senator Bambakias sinks into mental illness, Oscar's success attracts the unwanted attention of the Federal government, war is declared on Holland...

And so on. As events in the larger world threaten to spiral out of control, so Oscar's frantic attempts to put a spin on everything around him threaten to tear him apart by sheer centrifugal force. Much of the plot is advanced through conversation, as befits Oscar's "talent for making impossible things sound plausible"; it's a talent with which Sterling is also blessed in abundance, and which he deploys to full effect here. Although the sheer volume of concepts, insights, manic routines and asides can be overwhelming – it's a novel which consistently maintains the brain-burning intensity and information density usually found only in short stories, and one sometimes wants to feed it a little ritalin or to walk it up and down the escalators until it has calmed down – Sterling manages not only to hold the

Get Real

Paul J. McAuley



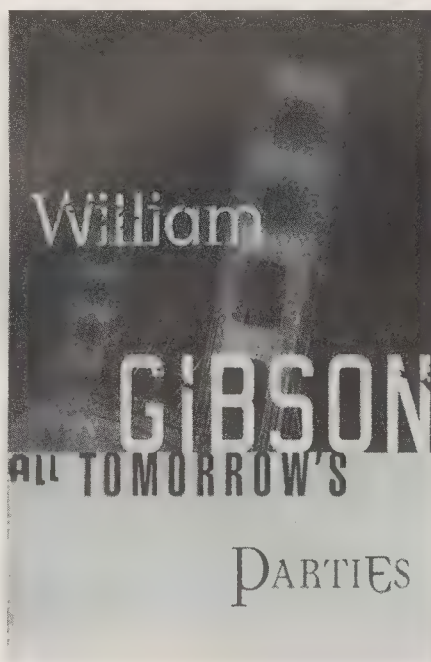
We have not received the UK edition of this book, so, once again, this is the US cover.

whole thing together but to finesse a plausible conclusion. Energetic, talkative, edifyingly didactic, shrewdly playing bare political and scientific microcultures while throwing out enough ideas to keep half a dozen lesser sf writers in work for the rest of their careers, *Distraction* is Sterling's best novel since *Schismatrix*, and needless to say is highly recommended.

While Bruce Sterling turns up the volume and contrast to heighten his take on the future, William Gibson's approach, despite his streetwise characters and caper plots, is more mannered and formal, a delicate bricolage of impressions and oblique images. Sterling's concerns are global and widescreen; Gibson's are local, focused on the survival of the marginalized and dispossessed in the chinks of the world machine. And so with *All Tomorrow's Parties* (Viking, £16.99) – its title is borrowed from a Velvet Underground song, and more than half its chapter titles are from rock lyrics – the final volume in a loose thematic trilogy whose laid-back plot nudges characters from *Virtual Light* and *Idoru* towards an epiphany that's both unexpected and a neat inversion of the climax of Gibson's "Sprawl" trilogy.

In the near future of *All Tomorrow's Parties*, as in *Distraction*, the world has undergone a radical balkanization along socio-economic rather than geographical boundaries – if cyberpunk has an enduring characteristic, it is not so much the fusing of information technology and Chanderlesque *noir*, but the rejection of the monolithic futures of traditional science fiction in favour of fragmentation, plurality and a gleeful inversion of the accepted power-structures. Here, Japanese culture has permeated America; California has divided into SoCal and NoCal; San Francisco has privatized enclaves, and its Bay Bridge, colonized by the disaffected and homeless, has been remade into a cross between a souk and a Victorian rookery.

The plot circles around the idea that a nodal point in history is about to be reached – we're not told what this means, but we are allowed to know that the last one occurred in 1911, involved the accidental death of Madame Curie's husband, and caused everything to change. Laney, from *Idoru*, gifted or cursed with the ability to sift patterns from the flux of electronic data and currently living in a cardboard box in a Tokyo subway station, sees the change coming, and knows that it involves the virtual pop star, or idoru, Rei Toei (also from *Idoru*). Laney hires Rydell, the rent-a-cop from *Virtual Light*, to travel to San Francisco's Bay Bridge, where the rev-



elation crucial to the node will occur, with a mysterious package that turns out to be a virtual-reality projector that contains the codes and memory and programs for the idoru. Meanwhile, other players are also converging on the final, fiery showdown: a ninja killer named Konrad, who leaves negative traces in the data patterns; media mogul Cody Harwood, owner of the ubiquitous Lucky Star convenience stores, who has his own plans for the node; Chevy Chevette, Rydell's ex-girlfriend; an autistic street-kid with an ability to comb data from the internet.

It is not unexpected that the final revelation is a tongue-in-cheek coup whose meaning and implications are deliberately left obscure. The plot, as in all of Gibson's novels, is less important than the haiku-like epiphanies, the relaxed wit transmitted through the beautifully observed voices of his characters, and the sharp focus of his gaze, which, like the knives which haunt the narrative, draws a slice through a densely envisioned future. Like Ballard, Gibson has transcended the genre; as in Ballard's catastrophic landscapes, we gaze into the mirrors of Gibson's near futures to see ourselves more clearly.

If Sterling's and Gibson's futures are complex and multi-layered heightenings of the present, John Barnes's short novel of ideas, *Candle* (Tor, \$22.95), presents a more traditional science-fictional future, one dominated by the ramifications of a single Big Idea. Barnes's Big Idea is that of memes, a term borrowed from Richard Dawkins and used here to define universal computer programs able to infect any hardware – including the human brain.

The future of *Candle*, shared by a previous novel, *Kaleidoscope Century*,

diverges from our present in the early 1990s. Boris Yeltsin is assassinated before he gains power in Russia, and the resulting European War gives rise to the development of memes and finally to the Meme Wars, in which various memes struggle for dominance within the collective consciousness of the human race. In *Candle*, the Meme Wars are long past, and almost everyone on Earth (but not in the colonies on Mars and the moons of the Outer Planets) is infected with a copy of the victorious Resuna program, linked through it to each other and to the emergent super-intelligence of One True. Only a few people, so-called cowboys, are uninfected, preferring to live as outcasts and outlaws hunted by men like Currie Culver, who is called out of retirement to track down one last cowboy, Lobo, an old enemy Culver had thought long-dead.

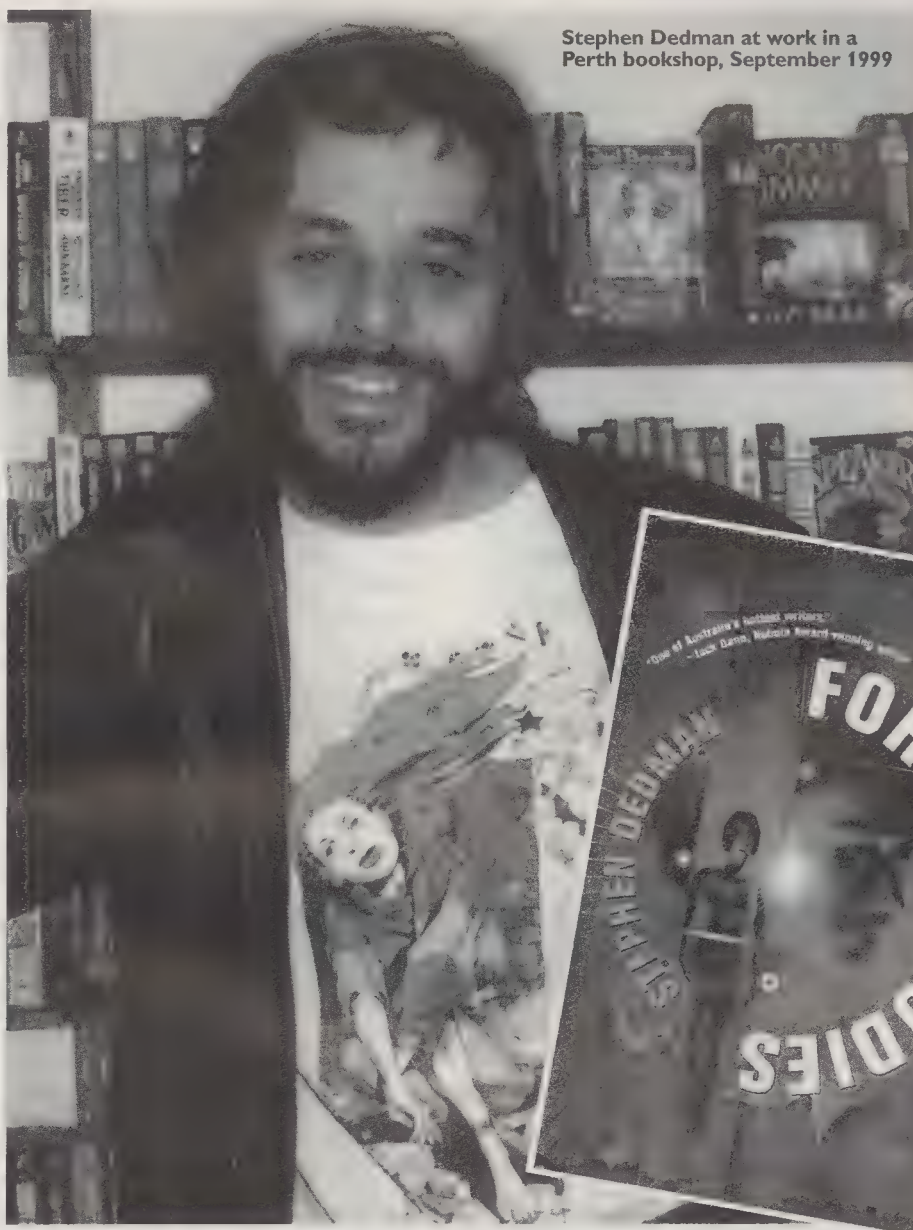
The first section of the novel is the gripping story of Culver's hunt through the snowy landscapes of the Colorado Rockies, with an unobtrusive depiction of Culver's relationship with his copy of Resuna, a fine evocation of place, and a nicely judged escalation in tension. But then Lobo, a.k.a. Dave Singleton, captures Culver and rids him of his copy of Resuna, and the novel bogs down in talk. Culver and Singleton amicably swap stories and home-baked philosophies, and design their new hideout with the enthusiasm of kids planning the ultimate treehouse, and that's all that happens until the plot is wound up when Singleton is captured and One True's real plans are revealed to Culver.

Culver's backstory about his role in the Meme Wars is both disturbingly brutal and convincing, but Singleton's, involving a philanthropic genius (whose fate is casually mentioned in passing in *Kaleidoscope Century*) and a complicated plan to insert an anti-meme meme in the head of every human being, is too reminiscent of sf's more absurd power fantasies. Despite a rather desperate compilation of coincidences, the two do not connect, and in the end, this interesting, intelligent, yet ultimately uninvolved novel, which perhaps contains the outline of the novel Barnes meant to write, fails to add up.

Stephen Dedman is a young Australian writer, but *Foreign Bodies* (Tor, \$23.95), his second novel, might have come straight from the heart of traditional American sf. His hero is an sf fan; the plot turns on an sf story the hero helps write; there's even a scene (quite a good scene, actually, as I suspect that for once Dedman is writing about what he knows) set in a right-wing sf convention.

Dedman's near future is one of depletion and exhaustion, emphatic-

Stephen Dedman at work in a
Perth bookshop, September 1999



Picture: Paul Brazier

cally divided into well-defended haves and hapless have-nots. Mike Galloway befriends a young have-not woman, Swiftie, who has colonized the balcony of his apartment, and after he has helped get her science-fiction short story published, unwisely allows her in. But Swiftie's body has been taken over by a time-traveller (time travel is possible only by sending back one's mind into a body at the point of death, although how this stops the body dying isn't clear), a male who takes Mike's body but, because he can't kill, turns Mike, in Swiftie's body, out onto the streets.

So far, so good. By a swift and neatly depicted coup, Mike's comfortably cocoon is shattered; he must survive as a streetperson in a strange body of the wrong gender, without credit or friends; he must try and get back to his own body. But this is no social satire: it is an sf novel, and the world must be saved. Mike is the epitome of a Heinleinesque competent

everyman hero. He survives life on the streets by undaunted application of logic and an ability to befriend those who can help him, none of whom are drug addicts, alcoholics or sick or mentally ill. Martial-arts skills are hardwired into his new body courtesy of its original occupant. He becomes a police informer, a lesbian, and a sex worker without a qualm; he is shot, raped and tortured, and shrugs it all off with a couple of wisecracks. In short, he is a figure from the kind of fantasies by which, to paraphrase an argument from David Simon and Edward Burns's excoriating *The Corner: A Year in the Life of an Inner-City Neighborhood* (Broadway, \$15), we excuse our failure to understand the unstructured lives of the underclasses. If we were suddenly put in their place, we fondly believe, we would excel at whatever work we could find, no matter how demeaning. We would save. We would get a place to live. We would study. We would pull ourselves up by

our bootstraps. Because, of course, if we found ourselves in their place we would still retain the unacknowledged privileges of our education, our upbringing, and our luck.

And so here, where the travails of unconvincingly portrayed street life quickly give way to an increasingly hectic plot in which Mike becomes involved with two time-travellers struggling to determine the outcome of a pivotal point in history. Drawing heavily on Heinlein's seminal time-travel story "By His Bootstraps" and his bloated late-period novel *I Will Fear No Evil*, tiresomely didactic, littered with references to the works of Heinlein and other Alpha Male sf writers, *Foreign Bodies* is the kind of sf written for the increasingly shrinking constituency of people who not only read nothing except sf, but also believe that the adolescent power fantasies of core sf are still relevant.

Also noted:

As scientists define the passing of time with increasing accuracy and all the world is hyperlinked by computers marching in lockstep, so we have become frantic multitaskers seeking to improve not each shining hour but each shining second, demanding more and more stuff more and more quickly – and someone had better be damn fast about delivering it, too. While I used to type, redraft and retype, now I move paragraphs and reformat entire documents with a couple of control keys; while I was once happy to feed sheets of paper into a daisywheel printer by hand, now I fret as my laser printer churns out text at an achingly slow five pages a minute. My American editor asks for a manuscript by the end of the week, and receives it courtesy of Federal Express; cover copy is approved on the day, via e-mail.

In *Faster: The Acceleration of Just About Everything* (Little, Brown £16.99), James Gleick muses on the measurement and universalization of time, the acceleration of expectation, the time we waste while saving time and much more, in 37 short essays which could well be designed to be consumed in our increasingly rare interstitial moments of idle time. Gleick's explications of the growing complexity of the world and our increasing impatience with it are models of their kind: witty, wry and revealing, packed with telling details and acute observations. The links between them are sometimes exiguous, and no real central thesis emerges, but science-fiction writers who need hints for the way the world is going should find time to read them all.

Paul J. McAuley

The term “paradigm shift” normally refers to a sudden change in social attitudes, but in fantasy and sf it could as well refer to the sub-genre where that substrate of which pure mathematics and the laws of nature are emergent manifestations suddenly changes its assumptions. Approaches vary between Greg Egan’s highly cerebral consideration (in “Luminous”) of how the universe would look if those sorts of arithmetic which we know to be commutative were suddenly to become non-commutative, to the prolonged, earthy and excellent jokes in Robert Rankin’s *The Garden of Unearthly Delights*. Mark Chadbourn’s *World’s End* (Gollancz, £16.99) adopts a more traditional approach. Accompanied by escalating failure among technological devices, the Old Gods of Celtic (and other) myth reappear in the world, intent on reassuming control.

So what’s to be done, when fire-breathing dragons present an entirely novel hazard to drivers on the M5, and country people do well to sit in o’ nights, for fear of the Wild Hunt? Well, there are five talismans of power hidden in various parts of Britain, and each is associated with a particular individual, born into the current generation to find them, and each other, so that their united potency may bring the Old Gods to book – or at least, to the negotiating table. Unfortunately, the five are very ordinary, not very bright or attractive people, notably lacking mutual interests or sympathies. Having come together, they fritter away time better devoted to saving the world to needling each other and bickering over trivia. I can only applaud Chadbourn’s realism in such a context, but little else about the book.

Chadbourn is one of those (depressingly many) writers who are certainly capable of competent work, but can’t be bothered half the time. Here we get house-agents’ jargon masquerading as literary prose: you can either describe a hotel bathroom or take it as read, but “all mod cons” will not do. We get editing errors: at one point a rabbit is roasted “over a spit on the fire,” instead of the other way round. We get simple illiteracy: “phase” for “faze.” And we get passages that look as if they’d been translated by someone who’d flunked a TEFL course:

It seemed the Night Walkers’ plan was in effect, but many elements were finely balanced and the timing was crucial; they could not afford any disruption. Although their infiltration of society was overwhelming, it appeared they feared Church and the others intensely;

And so on, but you get my drift. This book is sub-titled “Book One of the Age of Misrule”; misrule seems to have come early to the English class.

Paradigm Shifts

Chris Gilmore

Dennis Danvers’s similarly entitled *End of Days* (Avon, \$16) also uses some second-hand ideas, but to better effect.

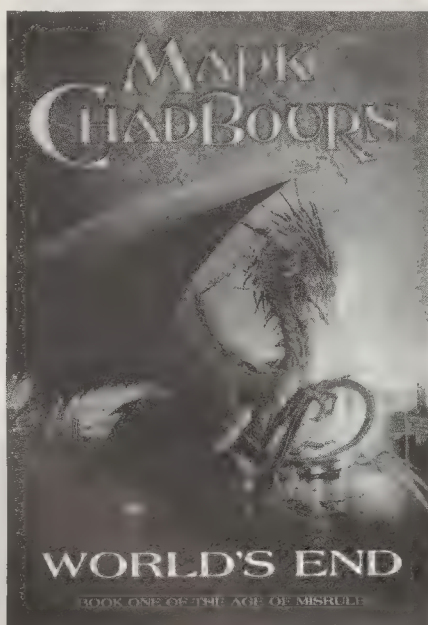
The central idea is that used by Greg Egan in *Permutation City*, though without the self-swallowing feature which allowed the city to detach itself permanently from the outside world. Here the “Bin” is a detailed virtual replica of Earth, into which the great majority of the population has downloaded, leaving the outside world in rather a mess. A hundred and twenty years on, the dominant force outside is a fundamentalist army led by a psychopath called Gabriel, whose ambition is to bring on the Day of Judgement by killing all non-believers. He and his henchmen believe that the Bin was destroyed long ago, but having discovered their error... unfinished business.

Inside the Bin a rather more benev-

olent tyranny is practised. The founder, having assumed for no obvious reason that a life in which anyone can have as much as he wanted of anything would drive us all mad, has severely constrained the operating program. No one need grow old or sick or die, you can change the décor of your home at whim, eating is optional, but that’s about it; if you want to go to Rio you have to board a plane, and people are even expected to work, for money. The economy is thoroughly unconvincing, with the curious effect that life in a world closely modelled on our own is actually less convincing than in Arthur C. Clarke’s *Diaspar*, or in Iain M. Banks’s *Culture*.

But of course, the real action lies outside, where Sammy, a disaffected Soldier of the Lord, and Laura, a golden-hearted hooker, are the Bin’s principal contacts with reality. Naturally, Gabriel is out to get them, and naturally the Bin is out to get him. The story develops as an unpretentious, fast-paced, romantic thriller with, for the philosophically inclined, a sub-plot devoted to discussions between various Bin-inmates about the desirability or otherwise of reintroducing random death into their world. This is conducted at a high intellectual level, but didn’t quite work for me – mainly because I have my own ideas about it, but also because Danvers has his, and had rather obviously decided in advance how the argument would end. Having brought it to a predictable conclusion, he tacks on a rather sentimental ending which doesn’t flow all that well from what has gone before. Even so, an enjoyable, intelligent book – and if not quite as intelligent as Greg Egan, well, how many of us are? Incidentally (to revive an old gripe), Danvers has divided his book into 20 named chapters, yet is there a contents page? Nooo... but there are a couple of blank sheets at the end, for children to scribble on, I presume.

The term “schoolboy humour” is often used as a routine pejorative, though there are many worse kinds – schoolmasterish humour, for instance. Moreover, though I’ve never seen it authoritatively defined, I would (disregarding gender) describe Jane Palmer’s *The Drune* (Swift, £5.99) as such a prime example of the genre that I feel impelled to attempt some notes towards a definition. Schoolboy humour (I proclaim) is essentially fantastic, revelling in absurd but pleasing images, and sonorous phrases of ridiculous import or none; it is playful, knowing much of parody, little of irony and nothing of lampoon; it is logically weak, and often contradicts itself, knowingly or otherwise; it reassures with its familiarity, being both the



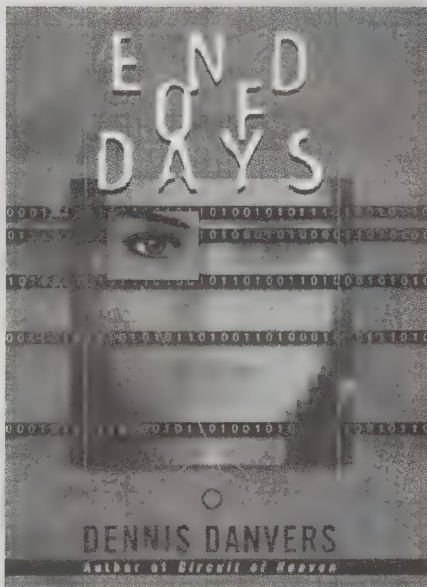
fountainhead of the running joke and the *locus classicus* for the inappropriate reference dragged in by the ears (in this case, the ears of Lewis Carroll's White Rabbit); and it suffers from the traditional schoolboy vice of slapdash execution.

The astute reader will, by now, suspect me of defining the genre *a posteriori* in terms of Palmer's book. Maybe, but to our mutttons!

Though there is surely no connection, the present frolic reads like a skit on Jeff Long's *The Descent*, and makes hardly more sense. The location is a huge cave system, part natural, part artificial and descending almost to the mantle. In it have been built a whole series of antediluvian cities, all different (because all constructed by different precursors of modern man) but all determinedly whimsical in their layout and furnishings, and all very hi-tech. Thither comes middle-aged, overweight Akaylia, who as a geologist has a credible excuse for messing about in caves. Thither also comes middle-aged, overweight Walton, who as an astronomer might reasonably be expected to direct his attention elsewhere, but who has the least credible excuse ever invented for anything: he was abducted and dumped there by a UFO. Both characters are paper-thin and very broad-brush: Akaylia speaks, when she can find the time, in doggerel too painfully bad to be funny, and in the sort of overblown alliteration traditionally ascribed to music-hall MCs; Walton has the greatest difficulty diverting his attention from memories of the women he has married at various times, and in terms of whom he perceives all his current experiences.

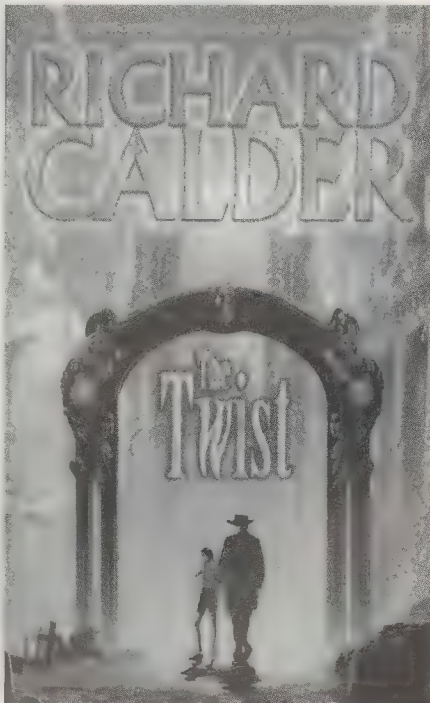
This is to be no Saga romance, however; the pair see very little of each other, spending most of their time seeking either to influence or to extricate themselves from the millennia-old intrigues in which the cities' surviving inhabitants are embroiled. Of these the most powerful is Pyg, a left-over intelligent dinosaur with a cruel sense of humour; the other, more human, types include Ossianic engineers and self-styled Atlantians (*sic*), though the machinery rather steals the show. That includes a number of "conversation pieces" (i.e., statues with artificial intelligence programmed to offer edifying conversation laced with unedifying gossip) and the eponymous Drune, an android who uncomfortably combines benevolent intentions, a thoroughly disagreeable personality and extreme moral and physical courage, with vulnerability to match. Not a happy recipe (Pyg spotted a natural victim long ago), though the Drune can dish it out as well as take it.

And the story? Well it all has to do



with the Yukon comet which didn't, in fact, put paid to the dinosaurs, just persuaded them to evacuate Earth. Now there's another comet on the way, but we humans have so polluted the astronomical environment that we've no chance of spotting the thing before it's too late. So guess who's thankless task it will be to blow it off course?

An agreeable piece of froth, but I wish Palmer could have put a little more effort into the writing. Aside from Akaylia's horrible verses, a phrase like "elegant statues of unidentifiable subjects" is no substitute for a concise and witty description, nor can I warm greatly to a "despite the fact" merchant. Not, therefore, recommended to the young and impressionable, though rather obviously geared to them. Why it wasn't marketed as a



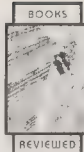
juvenile is a question I've asked before in other contexts, and doubtless will again – not that I expect an answer.

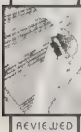
By one of those coincidences, Richard Calder's *The Twist* (Earthlight, £5.99) is also lushly self-indulgent, features an alliterative MC, and is enlivened by much verse and more literary references than you can shake a stick at. It's also much better written; Calder has a marvellous line in original similes. "Ladies and gentlemen," he called out, phlegm at the back of what might have been a metal-plated throat gurgling like acid in the diaphragm of a bullhorn." Ornamentation of this standard makes it both much funnier and more rewarding to take seriously – if you can compass that feat, for it's based on an original conceit of breathtaking unlikelyhood.

You've heard of those "near-death experiences", when people report having encountered, in a tunnel between this life and the next, a glowing figure of uncertain gender but refulgent beauty, who seemed about to make them welcome? Well, according to Calder, these psychopomps are no illusions, less still your sainted great aunt, but the incorporeal inhabitants of sundry extraterrestrial words including Venus – and they have their own agenda *vis-à-vis* your fleeing spirit. Moreover, in this time-line some of them have been dragged back when people didn't die on schedule; others have made it here by technological means; all have incarnated themselves in suitably impressive bodies, and they've set up a physical passage to Venus with its base in a re-enwildened version of the American West, circa 1957. Gosh!

Thither comes nine-year-old Nicola, accompanied by her parents, whose company she finds rebarbative, though she herself would surely be a trial to the most liberal and sophisticated. Being obsessively interested in adult sexuality (of which she intends to partake as soon as practicable), her idea of an evening's light entertainment is to steal a few dollars and hurry down to a saloon with a cabaret, there to sup rotgut whiskey among the whores, gamblers, shootists, bounty-hunters and other amusing lowlifes who traditionally infest such places. But is this not rather an unsuitable environment for a little girl? Well, yes; but should cuteness fail, she packs a derringer (stolen with the cash).

Being a pushy little madam, she rapidly embroils herself with Mr Twist, a gangster who was hanged very inefficiently, and Viva, his personal Venusian Death, currently incarnate as a woman of sultry beauty





and sundry superhuman powers. Nicola is really too young for the sexual tension to work, but a kid can dream can't she? Meanwhile, she sides with Twist and Viva against their many enemies and (being a good amateur locksmith, the fruit of many boarding-school break-outs) is actually of use when they get

captured by another Death with a more ambitious program.

"I do not wish so much to destroy all life on Planet Earth," said the queen, "as merely to wipe out the human race. Unfortunately, the former extinction is a condition of the latter. But do not concern yourselves..."

So that's all right. This is a truly glorious romp, and my only regret is that such a gem has been brought out in tacky A-format, while Chadbourn's lackadaisical offering comes in handsome hardback; but the race is not always to the swift.

Chris Gilmore

"This is how I planned it if he ever came back. Every Spring Cleaning, except when he forgets, I'll let Jane fly away with him to the darling Never Never Land, and when she grows up I will hope *she* will have a little daughter, who will fly away with him in turn – and in this way may I go on for ever and ever, dear Nana, so long as children are young and innocent."

So says Wendy at the end of "When Wendy Grew Up: An Afterthought" by J. M. Barrie (1908), and in this curious fragment she hereby establishes a loop, or at least tries to. And we all do this. We get into habits, and those habits might become little routines, and those routines, given time, might grow into traditions, and a tradition, if its shoulders are broad enough (who knows?) might even develop into a law. The next time, therefore, that you feel incapacitated by the stranglehold of *déjà vu*, remember that helpless deliverance into the servitude of the past and an inescapable future, seems to be what most of us actually *desire*.

Sooner or later, all but the most iconoclastic of us turn parts of our lives into the equivalent of the "Michael Finnegan" children's rhyme, which allowing for regional variations, goes something like this: "There once was a man called Michael Finnegan/ He grew whiskers on his chin, again/ The wind came out and blew them in, again/ Poor old Michael Finnegan, begin again... There once was a man called..." The loop hardens with every repetition, and loops become divine, so that every turn is a prayer to keep the loop strong. After all, most institutions are the result of wilder forces which have been tamed, but tamed with whipsacks so soft sometimes that they are barely noticeable. Begin again.

A loop has been forged by Paul J. McAuley, now that he has delivered the final volume in his Confluence trilogy, *Shrine of Stars* (Gollancz, £16.99). It's by far the best project he has ever delivered, and the most troublesome. On completion, the entire stack reshuffles itself, and the various nodal points of the text take on pinpricks of light and burn with great energy. With suspicion, firstly, and then with great fear, one starts to suspect that he has got the previous volume down all wrong. It was volume two I reviewed, *Ancients of Days*, and it arrived as a scruffy old proof that fell apart in my hands; but I liked it, and I said nice things, but now

Poor Old Michael Finnegan, Begin Again

David Mathew

that I've read the conclusion of the tale (which, if you haven't already guessed, is sort of the beginning of the tale as well, though not in the sense of it being a circular narrative: it's not) I wonder to what extent, if any, I actually *understood* it. Leaving behind the opinions of an earlier version of oneself is like leaving behind the land of your childhood – but leave them behind I must, I fear, because this trilogy is important.

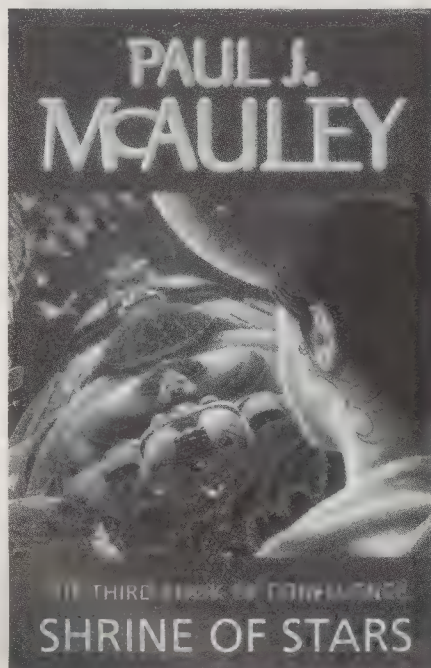
Yama, the grown-up version of the child that was found on the river, is as near to a Christ figure as any in con-

temporary sf. Comparisons to the narrator in Gene Wolfe's "Sun" books might be useful, but I maintain that McAuley and Wolfe are attempting to serve different purposes. Likewise, the likening to the work of Jack Vance, just because McAuley has set his trilogy in the very far future, seems far-fetched... Yama is deeply flawed, and easy to sympathize with. Without wanting to be, he's the answer to a grave puzzle, and he knows it. Captured by Dr Dismas for the execution of the latter's dastardly deeds, Yama manages to keep face, although he takes a few bruises for his troubles. The psychological battles between Yama and Dr Dismas are fascinating. Whatever Yama does, it never seems quite *good* enough, and he is obliged to have another crack. (Poor old Michael Finnegan, begin again.) Meanwhile, a loyal servant and a noble crew are searching for him; and all of this is set against the backdrop of the war.

We see beautiful things. We see Yama, lovestruck and frustrated. We see McAuley's brilliance with a descriptive, alliterative riff: "Something was moving out of the light of the setting sun: a small sleek shadow, its mind closed to Yama by the same opaqueness that closed the minds of the regulators. A flock of dark shapes swirled up..." Furthermore, McAuley's great skill in the Confluence sequence is in describing what other novelists might not have bothered with:

"The shanty was cluttered with bales of cigarettes wrapped in black plastic, wooden cases and machines or bits of machines. Some kind of large gun was in pieces on the floor by the large, flat stones which served as a hearth. Salted hides were slung beneath the roof, layered with aromatic tar bush leaves to keep off insects. A pentad of fisherfolk women and more than twice that number of their children moved about in the dusky evening light, lighting lamps, mending clothes, stirring the cook pot in which fish soup perpetually simmered, chattering in their dialect and casting covert glances at Pandaras and Tibor."

A beautiful bird with its wings clipped is still a beautiful bird, of course, and *Ancients of Days* was a beautiful bird – wings clipped. *Shrine of Stars* takes the reader to the heavens. The paragraphs are crowded with manic energy. You can taste the dust, hear the babble, smell the animals. In an average paragraph you might encounter nouns as disparate as onions, ropes, baubles and dreams



Steve Jones and R. Chetwynd Hayes at the launch of Jones' new anthology, *The Mammoth Book of Best New Horror: Tenth Anniversary Edition*.

Picture: Paul Brazier



(although you don't); there is the sense of *The Arabian Nights* and Scheherazade. The reader, like a snake, swallows the mouse whole, but devours it at the necessary leisure. A few paunchy declarations appear that might have been left out, but we've all forgiven worse.

Good fiction should be about risk-assessment, and so should good reviewing. At the beginning of the novel, when you are gigglingly arranging slabs of prose (examining time-lines, perhaps) and picking up clues, what you're really doing is playing a game of Dare. *Go on, I dare you*. You want to be correct, but you also want to be surprised. You predict the book's learning curve: the book learns (and so does the author) that nobody loves it, or that it's a baby prodigy. Its younger sibling – still a year or more away – will suffer the brunt of big brother's successes or failures: and all eyes will be on the poor sod. Well, *Shrine of Stars*, filled with Aprils and shoots, full of machines in the (characters') blood, is the last of its line. And any parent would be proud of it.

Personally, I tend to like my science messy: it's good to see the fingerprints, the eraser-smudges and the coffee-rings on the map.

I like to read about well-meaning screw-ups, like Yama. I like to enter the skull of science fiction and share with the author his material, enthusiasm, powers: and here we are present at the scene of a great making and unmaking. Finnegan, begin again. We can see him, Paul J. McAuley, in the river's mud, moulding beauty out of filth, with his fringe across his eyes and notions conflating at the back of his busy head. This is a trilogy that you will want pinned down to the board. This is magic.

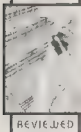
Was Barrie bored, or was he fuelling the next advance? Perhaps it matters not one jot. But one cannot expect to break loops with nobody noticing.

One particular loop was broken on the evening of 22nd February 1908, when the audience that had come to see *Peter Pan* also viewed the piece referred to above. "When Wendy Grew Up..." changes the tone and indeed the shape of the play, and the audience was shocked out of their expectations on that night – in exactly the same way as the reviewer is on opening Tad Williams' *Otherland, Volume Three: Mountain of Black Glass* (Orbit, £16.99).

No fair, you think as soon as you realize that although it is already considerably longer than *War and Peace* (but without Tolstoy's 500-or-so characters) it is not the final piece in the puzzle. Another volume is forthcoming in this saga about people trapped in VR-Land, trudging from one reality to another, and overcoming (or not) dangers on the way. Meanwhile children are being killed to fuel the infinity machine, and nobody knows quite what he or she is up to, or should be up to. The bluster and confusion, and the rather slow plot development, notwithstanding, this is another excellent volume from Williams. One character is in Ancient Greece, obliged to fight in the Trojan War. A set of characters is in Old Egypt, accompanied by a modern-day woman from the American Deep South. There are other people, or sims of people, fighting whatever comes their way; there are serial killers. The book reads like everything Williams ever wanted someone to talk about with, but couldn't find. But as he has rendered it into good fiction, how can we slate such an ambition?

The Mammoth Book of Best New Horror: Tenth Anniversary Edition. Well, talk about a book that describes itself! Do I even have a role here?

Edited by Stephen Jones for Robinson, and costing £6.99, this book, like all the *Best New Horror* books, is a teeming catch. As ever, Jones is to be congratulated for choosing tales that were originally published in a few more off-the-beaten-track places, as well as choosing some bigger names, though not necessarily better known stories from those names. Every *Best New Horror* is a comeback tour: you please the new customers, but you must please the older ones too. The difference being that even those of us who have loved horror fiction for years and years do not get brand new tales, rather tales from established (and, personally, favourite) authors. This is a nice fat volume (nearly 500 pages) of reprinted work from 1998, and nicely varied. Every name you might want and/or expect to be in here, is: Ramsey Campbell, Kim Newman, Tanith Lee, Stephen Laws, Michael Marshall

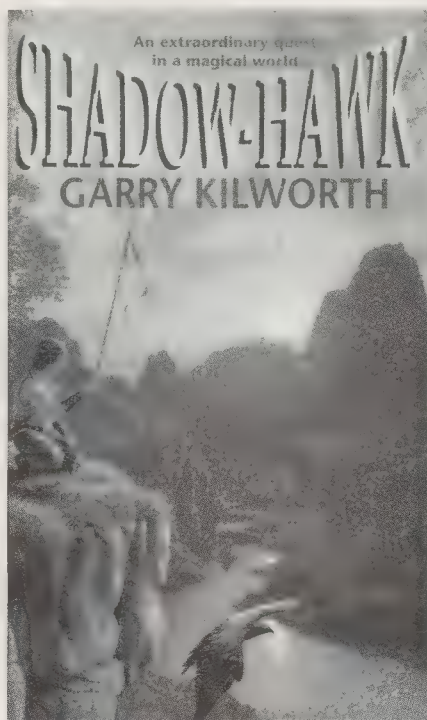


Smith, Dennis Etchison – all provide good stories. Furthermore, some very good work is supplied by Christopher Fowler, Peter Atkins and Chaz Brenchley – not to mention the collection's standout, the novella called "Mr Clubb and Mr Cuff," from Peter Straub. And if horror fiction is not all you want there are two long non-fiction pieces to bring to your attention.

The first is a comprehensive 61-page overview of the genre, taking in literature, films, TV; and the second piece is by Jones and Kim Newman: a "necrology," a round-up of the dead, which is interesting, a little ghoulish, but never morbid – because the lives are being celebrated. And if anything else was required from an anthology, there is also a list of useful addresses at the tail-end of the volume.

Briefly I would also like to note Garry Kilworth's new novel, but to do so I will have to confess another mistake, albeit of a different sort.

Every absence has a shape, but it is entirely in keeping with human nature that we take a long time to recognize that shape. Only recently, when I



received Garry Kilworth's *Shadow-Hawk* (Orbit, £6.99), did I recognize the shape of one of my personal

absences. I realized that, despite the author's long list of achievements, I had a Kilworth-shaped hole in my knowledge of the various (and oft-combined) fields he employs; and that I hadn't known what I'd been missing. For no good reason at all, I'd been remiss.

But this book is wonderful – representing, as it does, good fun without complications, and joy without debt. It takes me back to my reading of the author's *The Welkin Weasels*, a novel for children. The tone of *Shadow-Hawk* is certainly darker, but the method of presentation is comparable. The plot, however, is not for children. A white man is taken on as the rajah of an Oriental locale, employed to rid the waters of pirates, at which task he is extremely successful. A scion of minor royalty is outcast from his tribe and joins the rebellious member of the rajah's crew, in the position of executioner. The book has been meticulously researched, and it's packed with insight and information. Race relations and tribal and sexual politics are examined; and the life presented is hard and invigorating. *Shadow-Hawk* is very good fun indeed.

David Mathew

Fantasy and Favouritism

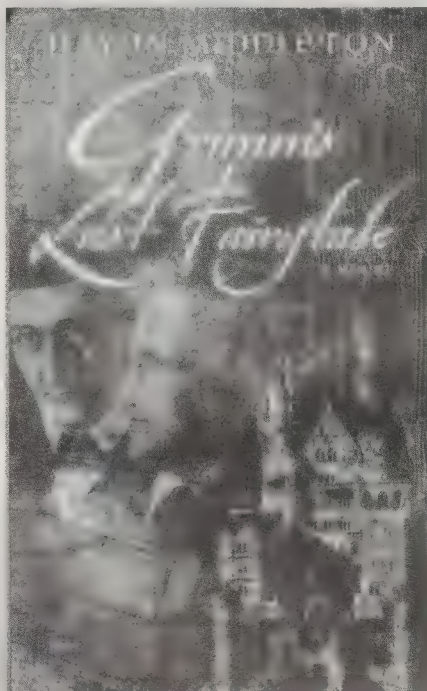
Paul Brazier

Fantasy is one of those areas of publishing that have largely fallen by the wayside in my reading. Sure, I read William Morris and E.R. Edison and J.R.R. Tolkien when I was young, and Heinlein's *Glory Road* was one of the first fantastic books I ever read: but the sheer length of most fantasy novels, combined with what seemed at best imprecise focus and at worst lazy attention to detail has driven me more and more into the arms of the hard sf writers who dot 'i's and cross 't's much more thoroughly, to my satisfaction. Nevertheless, I was glad to assay the present selection in the hope of rediscovering the joy of a good, well-turned and moral fantastic tale.

The first thing to become apparent is that the gamut of plot variations is quite small. Characters will either: discover long-lost fathers at the end of their narratives; set out on quests to restore or reinforce the old ways; or search for McGuffin-like keys of power. Given this paucity of plots, what is left to entertain us is the decoration of invention, and execution. And at this point, two clear front-runners emerge.

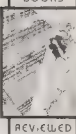
Haydn Middleton's *Grimm's Last Fairytale* (Abacus, £9.99) is a delightfully written book. Middleton's writing

is both light and assured, and is the more pleasing for the fact that it so well conveys the story. While it is true to say that the novel recounts the final few days of Jacob Grimm, eldest of the Brothers Grimm of fairy-tale fame, as



he returns with his niece, Auguste, to the places where he grew up, this bald statement of the facts does a grave disservice to Middleton's exceptional story-telling skills. Interwoven with the Professor's last journey is an account of his childhood and a parallel fairytale that appears to be at once a separate story, a commentary on Grimm's life, and a mythopoeic retelling of his life story. In parallel we learn of Auguste's burgeoning romance and her own secret quest, and in the background we see the movement towards the unification of Germany and Grimm's part in it, and the roots of the anti-semitism that was to explode in the next century. Episodes from the different narratives are juxtaposed in such a way as to add new depth and shade to the story, and the whole is fitted into a very modest 247 pages. In lesser hands, this would have ended up an incomprehensible muddle. As it is, this book is such a delight, so moving and so complete, that I was sorely tempted to go back to the beginning and read it again just to admire the craftsmanship displayed in assembling it. But time did not allow. Yet.

Nearly as impressive is a first novel for young adults from Jan Siegel. *Prospero's Children* (Voyager, £12.99) tells the story of Fern, a sixteen-year-old on the cusp between girlhood and womanhood, who is condemned to a summer holiday with her younger brother and her widowed father at an old house in Yorkshire. The supernatural events that ensue



"Jan Siegel" centre (a.k.a. Amanda Hemingway) with, I think she said, her god-daughters Poppie left, and Sophie, at the launch of *Prospero's Children*

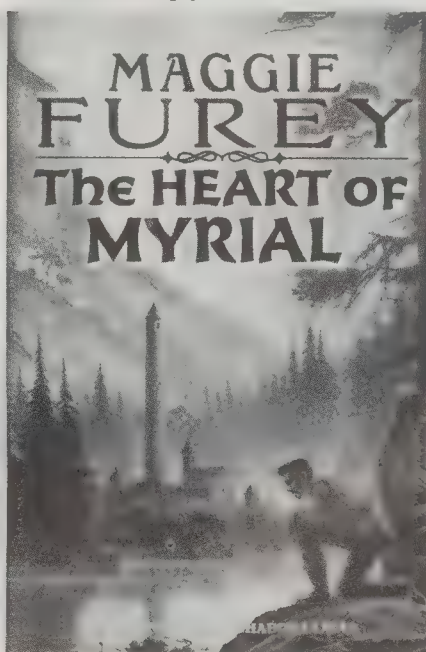
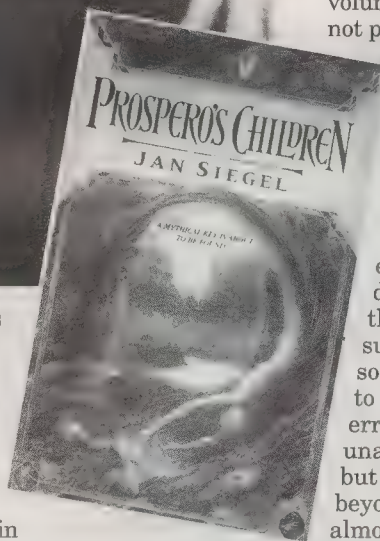
Picture: Paul Brazier

take up the first half of the book. Fern is then transported back through time to Atlantis. The second half of the book consists of her adventures in Atlantis, and how she contrives to get back to her own time and place.

This is thus truly a book of two halves – and it is peculiar how much more interesting the present-day-with-magic half is than the imagined world of Atlantis. Where Haydn Middleton's evocation of mid-19th century Germany is both tantalizing and fascinating because it sheds light on our own modern history, I found the setting of Atlantis simply uninteresting because it has no connection to anything else I already know. This is perhaps less a fault of the author than of the reader, but it does seem that the only connection between Atlantis-then and England-now is that the author wanted there to be one.

Of course, a cavil like this cannot detract from the achievement of the book. Siegel writes with a delightful fluency – she has a particular propensity for using strange and wonderful words for colours – and she moves with remarkable ease from the bottom of an ancient ocean to a contemporary London art gallery. But... I really hate criticizing this book, because I enjoyed so much about it... but as the final sentence falls into place and the circularity of the story is established, like *The Worm Ourobours* with its tail in its mouth, I felt somehow cheated and

excluded. This is exactly the device that is used by Heinlein in "By His Bootstraps", by Delany (with a twist) in *Dhalgren*, and indeed by James Joyce in *Finnegans Wake*. The story is closed off, becomes an infinite loop, and we become simply observers of its com-



pleteness. And while I can't help but admire the extreme cleverness of the construction of such a story, I do feel excluded, and I don't like that.

Of course, there is one thing that is worse than such closure, and that is the morbid open-endedness of soap opera and some fantasy series. *The Heart of Myrial* (Orbit, £16.99), Maggie Furey's latest offering, is, I am sorry to report, "Book One of *The Shadowleague*." I suppose it makes good commercial sense to have a long-running series that you can keep adding to until the punters stop buying it, but I still count myself fortunate that I refused to read the first volume of Robert Jordan's *Wheel of Time* because it didn't say how many volumes it would be, and I purely hate beginning to read a fiction that I know is not yet finished. Jordan is up to seven or eight volumes now, and as Furey's book does not promise a number of volumes, it is

only to be expected that her publishers are hoping she will emulate Jordan's success.

As a first in a series, this book is necessarily heavily populated with characters and their back histories, which leaves only a small amount of space for the events of this story, but Furey does a respectable job of packing them all in, so it is perhaps not surprising that, with her attention so much on the plot, she manages to fall into the fundamental stylistic error of leaving almost no noun unadjectivized. It is a small error, but one that, once noticed, irritates beyond all proportion. So I was almost relieved to notice that, while there seems to be a fairly equal spread of male and female characters, where the males run the whole gamut from wholly evil through stupid to saintly, all of the women except the one bad egg are goodies.

Of course, it may be that the cast is simply too large, and the canvas too broad, to introduce all of it in this way. We appear to be on a science-fictional world where an elder race has deposited lots of different mythological species, all separated from one another in a kind of planetary myth zoo. The elder race is long gone, and the divisions between the various enclosures are breaking down – although it is hinted that this is at least in part the doing of the missing son/father figure, using a McGuffin that others set out on a quest to find... although I couldn't find a kitchen sink in there.

Which isn't to say this is a bad book. It will probably do very well with its target audience, and that can't be a bad thing. And at least Furey tries to make all her characters interesting and interested in more than just fighting and getting drunk. There are nice touches

added to even the most minor characters, and when people do get killed, it often really seems to be a shame.

The same cannot be said of Stan Nicholls' *Legion of Thunder* (Gollancz, £9.99), "Book 2 of *Orcs: First Blood*." I suppose this is what is called "fighting fantasy." Personally, I can't find anything fantastic about it, although there is plenty of fighting. Along with this book I received the paperback of *Bodyguard of Lightning*, Book 1 in the series. By page 100 of this first volume there had been three major battles and nearly everyone the Orcs had come up against had been slaughtered. At this point I stopped counting, and simply watched stunned as Nicholls shuffled the clichés before my very eyes, continued to murder anyone else who stood in the way of his marauding band, and attempted to elicit sympathy by having one of the Orcs injured or sick and cared for by the others so that they are slowed down in their mayhem, but the unfortunate is then either killed or cured once another sympathy carrier is generated. Moreover, the story doesn't end at the end of the first book: it just leaves off on a cliff-hanger that is not resolved until chapter 3 of the second book.

Really, the covers say it all, showing a group of human-type bodies with grotesque faces. The most galling thing of all is that, in among the rampant clichés and stereotypes it is perfectly evident that Stan Nicholls is actually a very good writer, running on autopilot probably trying to fulfil another publisher's quota for formula fantasy. It's a terrific shame. Certainly, Mary Gentle did the make-the-orc-a-better-understood-warrior much more effectively in her wonderful *Grunts* (and whatever happened to Gentle's newest book, long-promised by Gollancz? There is a fantasy I would *really* like to read!). I'm sure Nicholls could do much better if he only tried to write something meaningful.

Fantasy for children was rarely better than Paul Stewart & Chris Riddell's *Stormchaser* (Doubleday, £10.99), Book 2 of *The Edge Chronicles*. Being a book for children, this is a complete novel in its own right (kids

would never stand for the type of non-ending Nicholls offers), but follows on recognizably from the first book, *Beyond the Deepwoods*. Now the first book was not very good, having to establish its set of characters, so the tired old find-your-absent-father cliché is trotted out (has *no-one* seen the *Star Wars* films?). But the illustrations make up for it, and this second novel is a real treat. Sure; it is another fantasy quest, but interesting, horrible, and unexpected things happen, are sometimes solved by accident and sometimes by guile, and the illustrations are still wonderful. The writing isn't wonderful, but there is a plain and unadorned style that is just about perfect for kids, and that is not nearly as easy as it looks.

Now it says in the publicity blurb that Stewart and Riddell get together in a Brighton pub and plot these stories. I reckon I've been into most of the pubs in Brighton, and I haven't found them yet. But I'm gonna keep trying, so I can buy them both a drink – and maybe find out early what happens next. Watch this space.

Also noted:

Shadows at Midnight (Sarob Press. £20) by L.H. Maynard and M.P.N. Sims is one of those beautifully produced small press books I was harping on about in a previous review. It has two superb line drawings on the cover, and is properly bound in sewn signatures with elegant board covers. This time, however, I have to admit, that the contents aren't so wonderful. It says that this



SHADOWS AT MIDNIGHT • L.H. MAYNARD & M.P.N. SIMS • SAROB PRESS



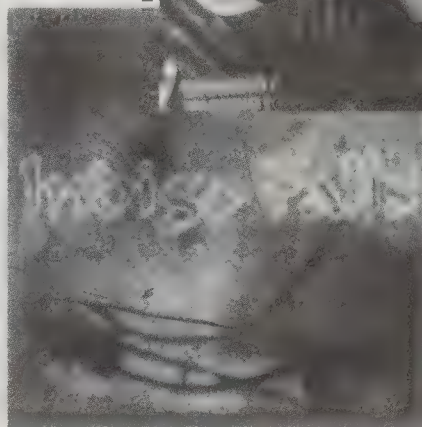
book was first published in 1979, and in the interim "all ten stories have been completely revised – to the extent that the authors consider them to be new stories." If you wonder why you have never heard of the authors, it is probably because the standard of these stories, even after twenty years of revision, is not very high – indeed there are only a couple, "Smoke" and "Border End," that I would deem to be "stories" at all, in the sense that they set up a narrative tension that is then resolved. The others seem to be little more than fictional anecdotes, and draw fewer conclusions than most real-life anecdote-tellers in my experience. Still, if tales of straightforward unexplained supernatural occurrences is what you are looking for, there is nothing wrong with the writing here, and this book is to be thoroughly recommended.

During the launch party for *Prospero's Children*, I was introduced to Suzanne Barbieri (that's her below, right, with Pat Cadigan), who told me she was the singer with a band called *Indigo Falls*. She promised to send me their CD, which features a song with words by Michael Marshall Smith, which she duly did. Broadly, it sounds like a cross between 1990s ambient and 1970s progressive

rock, and I like it a lot. The M.M. Smith lyrics are, as you would expect, spooky, but judge for yourself – you can find the lyrics on their web-site at <http://members.aol.com/indigofall/indigo.htm>. Then buy the album.

Paul Brazier

Picture: Paul Brazier



The following is a list of all sf, fantasy and horror titles, and books of related interest, received by Interzone during the month specified. Official publication dates, where known, are given in italics at the end of each entry. Descriptive phrases in quotes following titles are taken from book covers rather than title pages. A listing here does not preclude a separate review in this issue (or in a future issue) of the magazine.

Arden, Tom. **The King and Queen of Swords: Second Book of The Orokon.** Millennium, ISBN 1-85798-898-1, 528pp, A-format paperback, cover by Kevin Jenkins, £6.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in 1998; reviewed by Chris Gilmore in *Interzone* 139.) 25th November 1999.

Arden, Tom. **Sultan of the Moon and Stars: Third Book of The Orokon.** Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-06372-6, 518pp, hardcover, cover by Kevin Jenkins, £16.99. (Fantasy novel, first edition; "Tom Arden" is the pseudonym of an Australian-born academic, lately of Queen's University, Belfast.) 9th December 1999.

Baxter, Stephen, and others. **Web 2028.** Millennium, ISBN 1-85798-870-1, 630pp, A-format paperback, £6.99. (Sf omnibus, first edition; it contains six short novels in the "Web" series, originally published as children's books but here seemingly repackaged for adults: *WebCrash* by Baxter [1998], *Cydonia* by Ken MacLeod [1998], *Computopia* by James Lovegrove [1998], *Spindrift* by Maggie Furey [1998], *Avatar* by Pat Cadigan [1999], and *Walkabout* by Eric Brown [1999]; there is a definite article in the book's title as given on the cover, but it's not so on the title page [where it counts]; various of these books were reviewed, briefly, by Paul Brazier in *Interzone* 146.) 25th November 1999.

Beresford, J. D. **The Wonder.** Introduction by Jack L. Chalker. "Bison Frontiers of Imagination." Bison Books [University of Nebraska Press, PO Box 880484, Lincoln, NE 68588-0484, USA], ISBN 0-8032-6162-4, ix+295pp, trade paperback, £8.95. (Sf novel, first published in the UK as *The Hampdenshire Wonder*, 1911; this is the American edition of October 1999 with a new introduction, and a UK price and publication date; distributed in the UK by Combined Academic Publishers Ltd, 41 Bayston Rd., London N16 7LU; John Davys Beresford [1873-1947] was a writer who clearly showed the influence of H. G. Wells – among other things, he wrote one of the first critical books on Wells's scientific romances, which came out in 1915 [and it would be interesting to see that reprinted]; his daughter, children's writer Elisabeth

Beresford, invented the Wombles of Wimbledon Common; *The Hampdenshire Wonder*, the tale of a superbrat, paved the way for novels like Olaf Stapledon's *Odd John* [1935], and is still well worth reading; this is a nice edition, even if Chalker's three-page introduction is rather skimpy and uninformative and the book uses the less distinctive American title [which drops "Hampdenshire"]; like the other Bison Books reprints – see also below, under Mary E. Bradley Lane and Philip Wylie – this is recommended to all those who are interested in the roots of sf.) December 1999.

Bertin, Joanne. **Dragon and Phoenix.** Earthlight, ISBN 0-684-86051-1, 540pp, C-format paperback, cover by Bob Eggleton, £9.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1999; sequel to *The Last Dragonlord*.) 13th December 1999.

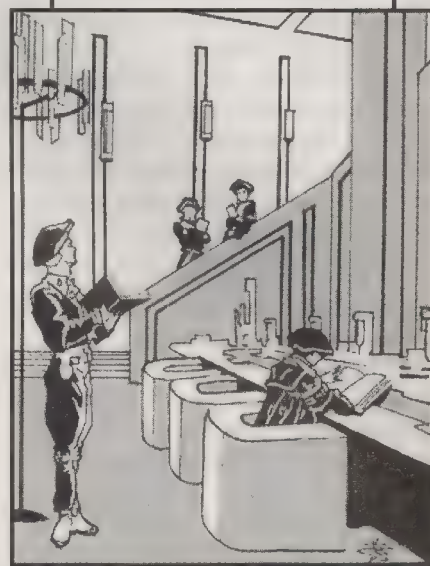
Bertin, Joanne. **The Last Dragonlord.** Earthlight, ISBN 0-671-021-923, 397pp, A-format paperback, cover by Bob Eggleton, £6.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1998.) 13th December 1999.

Bova, Ben. **Return to Mars.** New English Library, ISBN 0-340-70796-8, viii+548pp, A-format paperback, cover by Mark Harrison, £6.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1999; sequel to *Mars* [1992].) 2nd December 1999.

Christian, Deborah. **The Truthsayer's Apprentice: Book One of the Lore-giver Series.** Tor, ISBN 0-312-86516-3, 396pp, C-format paperback, cover by Donato, \$15.95. (Fantasy novel, first edition; it seems that Deborah Christian, whose sf



BOOKS RECEIVED



NOVEMBER 1999

novel *Mainline* was reviewed here a while back by James Lovegrove [*Interzone* 114], has given in to the siren call of the Big Commercial Fantasy approach; the book is physically over-size, as BCFs always are, and it has quotes on the back from people like Jennifer Roberson saying things like: "If you like Robin Hobb, you'll like this!") December 1999.

Clapham, Mark, and Jon de Burgh Miller. **Twilight of the Gods.** "The New Adventures." Virgin/NA, ISBN 0-426-20536-7, 242pp, A-format paperback, cover by Fred Gambino, £5.99. (Shared-universe sf novel, first edition; it features the galactic adventures of Bernice Summerfield [a former associate of Doctor Who], created by Paul Cornell; a debut novel for Miller, although Clapham has co-authored two previous books; in a gloomy little afterword, dated July 1999, series editor Peter Darvill-Evans states: "This could be the last NA book for some time" and "I'm about to part company from Virgin Publishing.") 2nd December 1999.

Clark, Simon. **Judas Tree.** Hodder & Stoughton, ISBN 0-340-73913-4, 423pp, hardcover, cover by Larry Rostant, £17.99. (Horror novel, first edition; it's described as being "in the classic tradition of *The Haunting of Hill House*, *Rebecca* and *The Shining*.") 2nd December 1999.

Clarke, Arthur C. **Profiles of the Future: An Inquiry Into the Limits of the Possible.** "Millennial Edition." Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-06790-X, ix+213pp, hardcover, £18.99. (Non-fiction collection of futurolog-

ical essays by a major sf writer, first published in 1962; a previous revised edition appeared in 1982; the new Preface is dated "April 1999" and the book appears to have been fairly lightly revised and updated throughout; oh, how I loved this book when I first read the Pan paperback edition as a 14-year-old! — which makes me almost afraid to try re-reading it.) 25th November 1999.

Clute, John, and Peter Nicholls, eds. **The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction**. [2nd edition.] Orbit, ISBN 1-85723-897-4, xxxvi+1396pp, C-format paperback, cover by Chris Moore, £25. (Sf encyclopedia, first published in the UK, 1993; the original edition, under the general editorship of Peter Nicholls, was published by Granada in 1979; this paperback differs from the 1993 hardcover printing in that 25 pages listing "New Data, Typographical Errors, Factual Corrections and Miscellanea" have been added to the end; this is the essential single-volume reference work on sf — it's bigger, and certainly a lot more interesting, than the *Oxford Companion to English Literature*; why we have had to wait six years for a UK paperback edition [when an American one, from St Martin's Press, came out in 1995] is a mystery.) 11th November 1999.

Dedman, Stephen. **Foreign Bodies**. Tor, ISBN 0-312-86864-2, 286pp, hardcover, \$23.95. (Sf novel, first edition; proof copy received; Dedman's second novel; reviewed by Paul McAuley in this issue of *Interzone*.) 27th December 1999.

Ford, Jeffrey. **Memoranda**. Avon/Eos, ISBN 0-380-80262-7, 230pp, trade paperback, cover by Phil Singer, \$12. (Fantasy novel, first edition; a follow-up to his earlier unconventional fantasy, *The Physiognomy* [1997], which was praised; according to the accompanying publicity sheet, Ford is a protégé of the late John Gardner [author of the modern classic *Grendel*] and a Professor of Writing and Early American Literature.") Late entry: 5th October publication, received in November 1999.

Frenkel, James, ed. **Bangs and Whimpers: Stories About the End of the World**. Lowell House/Roxbury Park, ISBN 0-7373-0271-2, xii+219pp, trade paperback, cover by Ron Walotsky, \$15.95. (Sf anthology, first edition; it consists of 19 reprinted stories, by Isaac Asimov, J. G. Ballard [his vignette "A Guide to Virtual Death," which first appeared right here in *Interzone*], Arthur C. Clarke, Philip K. Dick, Howard Fast, Neil Gaiman, Robert A. Heinlein, Richard Kadrey ["Fire Catcher," another story from *Interzone*], Frederik Pohl, Robert Reed, Robert Sheckley, Robert Silverberg, James

Tiptree, Jr, John Varley, Connie Willis and others; particularly welcome are the vintage reprints, "Finis" by Frank Lillie Pollock [from *Argosy*, June 1906 — a powerful, hard-headed story for its time, almost up to Wellsian standards] and "The Portable Phonograph" by Walter Van Tilburg Clark [from a magazine unknown, circa 1940 — similarly good, but more pretentiously written]; unfortunately, Frenkel fluffs the ascriptions of both those old stories, misspelling Pollock's name and giving the impression that the Clark piece dates from 1950 [when a large part of its point today is that it was written well before the Atom Bomb]; there's some very familiar material in there — the book opens with "The Nine Billion Names of God" and closes with "The Last Question" — but it's a fine selection overall.) November 1999.

Gaiman, Neil. **The Sandman: The Dream Hunters**. Illustrated by Yoshitaka Amano. DC/Vertigo, ISBN 1-56389-573-0, 128pp, hardcover, cover by Amano, \$29.95. (Fantasy novella, first edition; although it is linked to the "Sandman" graphic novels, this is not actually a comic strip but a plain-text story, based on an old Japanese tale, with copious facing-page illustrations and a central fold-out — beautiful artwork, and a beautifully-produced book.) Late entry: 27th October publication, received in November 1999.

Gaiman, Neil. **Smoke and Mirrors: Short Fictions and Illusions**. Headline, ISBN 0-7472-7418-5, 374pp, C-format paperback, cover by J. K. Potter, £9.99. (Fantasy collection, first published in the USA, 1998; there is a simultaneous hardcover edition [not seen]; it contains 30 stories and poems which together represent almost all of Gaiman's short fiction that has

been published outside the comics medium; about a dozen of these mostly slim and graceful pieces appeared previously in his small-press collection *Angels & Visitations* [DreamHaven, 1993]; reviewed by Paul McAuley in *Interzone* 142.) 6th January 2000.

Goodkind, Terry. **Soul of the Fire**. Gollancz, ISBN 1-85798-913-9, 508pp, C-format paperback, cover by Keith Parkinson, £10.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1999; this is Book Five of "The Sword of Truth," although it does not state as much on the front cover or title page.) 9th December 1999.

Gottlieb, Sherry. **Worse Than Death**. Tor/Forge, ISBN 0-312-87392-1, 251pp, hardcover, \$22.95. (Horror novel, first edition; proof copy received; a second vampiric erotic thriller from erstwhile bookseller Gottlieb [for 20 years owner of "A Change of Hobbit," Santa Monica, CA], whose first, *Love Bite* [1994], was made into a TV movie called *Deadly Love* [1995].) January 2000.

Green, Simon R. **Haven of Lost Souls**. "Hawk & Fisher, 1." Millennium, ISBN 1-85798-900-7, 616pp, A-format paperback, cover by Jon Sullivan, £6.99. (Fantasy omnibus, first edition; the three constituent novels, *No Haven for the Guilty*, *Devil Take the Hindmost* and *The God Killer*, were first published in the USA [by Ace Books], 1990-1991.) 25th November 1999.

Haldeman, Joe. **Forever Peace**. Millennium, ISBN 1-85798-899-X, 351pp, A-format paperback, cover by Chris Moore, £5.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1997; although it won the Hugo, Nebula and John W. Campbell Awards in 1998, this does not appear to have had a British edition until now; reviewed by Paul McAuley in *Interzone* 130.) 25th November 1999.

Harrison, Harry. **The Stainless Steel Rat Joins the Circus**. Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-06866-3, 269pp, hardcover, cover by Andy Parker, £16.99. (Humorous sf novel, first published in the USA, 1999; the latest Slippery Jim diGriz adventure, in a series which has been running since 1961.) 16th December 1999.

Herbert, Frank. **Dune**. Illustrated by John Schoenherr. "The Greatest Science Fiction Novel of All Time." Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-06856-6, 447pp, hardcover, cover by Schoenherr, £16.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1965; we can't agree with the strapline about it being "the greatest," but this is certainly a long-lived pop classic of fantasy-tinged sf which has sold in the multi-millions; the illustrator, Schoenherr, was the one who did the original covers and interior art for the *Analog* magazine serials [1963-65] which went to make up



the book; the exact provenance of his artwork here [all reproduced as colour plates] is not explained, but it seems to be copyrighted 1977 and presumably derives from an earlier American deluxe edition of the novel.) 16th December 1999.

Holt, Tom. **Snow White and the Seven Samurai**. Orbit, ISBN 1-85723-898-2, 308pp, hardcover, cover by Paul Cemmick, £15.99. (Humorous fantasy novel, first edition; according to the blurb, "computers and fairy tales collide to hilarious effect in [this] latest sparkling cocktail of mayhem, wit and wonder.") 2nd December 1999.

Johnson, Kij. **The Fox Woman**. Tor, ISBN 0-312-85429-3, 382pp, hardcover, cover by Susan Seddon Boulet, \$24.95. (Fantasy novel, first edition; proof copy received; set in ancient Japan, this is a debut novel by a new American writer who is already known for her short stories.) January 2000.

Jones, Stephen. **The Essential Monster Movie Guide: A Century of Creature Features on Film, TV and Video**. Introduction by Forrest J. Ackerman. Titan, ISBN 1-85286-935-6, 448pp, C-format paperback, £16.99. (Illustrated A-Z reference guide to monster movies and the people who made them; first edition; with its double columns and small print, this is probably Steve Jones's most substantial film reference book yet, covering some of the same ground as his earlier books on vampire movies, werewolf movies, etc, but going a great deal further; recommended for its copious information on the obscure nether reaches of this cinematic genre.) 19th November 1999.

Koontz, Dean. **False Memory**. Headline, ISBN 0-7472-2057-3, 626pp, hardcover, £16.99. (Horror/suspense novel, first edition [?]; there is a simultaneous trade paperback edition [not seen].) 6th December 1999.

Kovacs, Lee. **The Haunted Screen: Ghosts in Literature and Film**. McFarland, ISBN 0-7864-0689-5, 183pp, hardcover, \$32.50. (Illustrated critical study of ghost movies and their written sources; first edition; it goes for depth rather than breadth, discussing just nine films – *Wuthering Heights*, *The Ghost and Mrs Muir*, *Portrait of Jennie*, *Letter from an Unknown Woman*, *The Uninvited*, *Liliom*, *Our Town*, *Ghost and Truly*, *Madly*, *Deeply*; the last was actually a British made-for-TV movie, as opposed to an American theatrical feature film, which is rather a different art-form, but let's not quibble; an intelligent choice of subjects – recommended.) December 1999.

Lancaster, Kurt. **Warlocks and Warpdrive: Contemporary Fantasy Enter-**

tainments with Interactive and Virtual Environments. Foreword by Brooks McNamara. McFarland, ISBN 0-7864-0634-8, xii+186pp, hardcover, £24.40. (Study of sf/fantasy games and what the author calls "performance studies" with respect to sf and fantasy [a new buzzword in academia, apparently, which here is stretched to cover everything from theatre and live-action role-playing to the wearing of *Star Trek* costumes in public]; first published in the USA, 1999; this is the American edition with a British price added, distributed in the UK by Shelwing Ltd, 127 Sandgate Rd., Folkestone, Kent CT20 2BH; unlike most McFarland books, which are written by fans or enthusiasts without too much intellectual pretension, this is a serious study which is probably a revised version of an academic thesis; the author was born in 1967, and has done graduate work at New York University; one of his chapters first appeared as an article in the British journal, *Foundation*; the author of the foreword, Brooks McNamara, is a Professor Emeritus of the Department of Performance Studies at NYU.) 20th January 2000.

Lane, Mary E. Bradley. **Mizora: A World of Women**. Introduction by Joan Saberhagen. "Bison Frontiers of Imagination." Bison Books [University of Nebraska Press, PO Box 880484, Lincoln, NE 68588-0484, USA], ISBN 0-8032-7992-2, xii+147pp, trade paperback, £6.95. (Sf novel, first published in the USA as *Mizora: A Prophecy*, 1890; a facsimile of the first edition [New York: Dillingham], this is the American edition of October 1999 with a new sub-title, a new introduction, and a UK price and publication date; distributed in the UK by Combined

Academic Publishers Ltd, 41 Bayston Rd., London N16 7LU; Mary E. Bradley Lane, whose dates are unknown, first serialized this novel anonymously in a newspaper, the *Cincinnati Commercial*, in 1880-81; set in an all-woman society discovered at the Earth's core, it's now regarded as a minor classic of feminist utopian sf, a book to shelve alongside Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *Herland* [1915]; judging from the opening chapters, it's quite engagingly written.) December 1999.

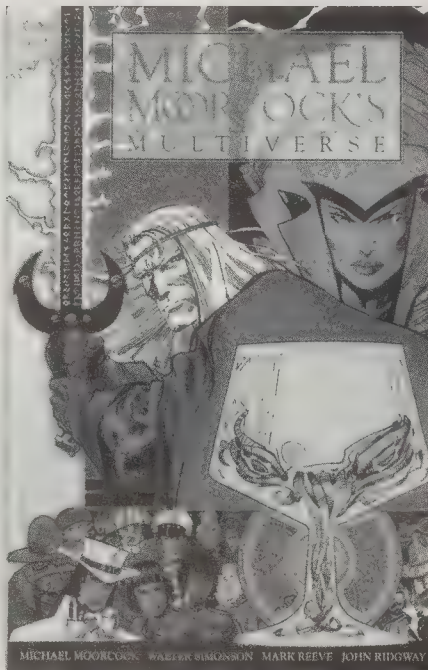
Leiber, Fritz. **Return to Lankhmar**. Introduction by Neil Gaiman. Millennium, ISBN 1-85798-846-9, x+454pp, A-format paperback, cover by Geoff Taylor, £6.99. (Fantasy omnibus, first published in the USA, 1997; originally published by White Wolf in the USA, this is the third in an attractive four-volume repackaging of all the late Fritz Leiber's "Fafhrd and Gray Mouser" stories; the present one comprises the books previously published as *The Swords of Lankhmar* [1968] and *Swords and Ice Magic* [1977]; recommended.) 25th November 1999.

Lord-Wolff, Peter. **The Silence in Heaven**. Tor/Forge, ISBN 0-312-86675-5, 384pp, hardcover, \$24.95. (Fantasy novel, first edition; proof copy received; this is possibly a debut novel by a new American writer; it "does for Angels what Anne Rice did for Vampires," says a quote on the back cover – but we thought Storm Constantine had already done that?) January 2000.

McHugh, Maureen F. **Mission Child**. Orbit, ISBN 1-85723-861-3, x+385pp, A-format paperback, cover by Mark Salwowski, £6.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1998; McHugh's third novel; this seems to be the first British edition.) 2nd December 1999.

Moorcock, Michael. **Behold the Man**. "SF Masterworks, 22." Millennium, ISBN 1-85798-848-5, 124pp, B-format paperback, cover by Jim Burns, £6.99. (Sf novella, first published in the UK, 1969; expanded from the Nebula Award-winning shorter version which first appeared in *New Worlds* #166, September 1966.) 25th November 1999.

Moorcock, Michael. **Michael Moorcock's Multiverse**. Illustrated by Walter Simonson, Mark Reeve and John Ridgway. DC/Vertigo, ISBN 1-56389-516-1, 288pp, trade paperback, cover by Simonson, \$19.95. (Fantasy graphic novel, first edition; originally published in the USA as a 12-issue comic book, 1997-1998, comprising "three interwoven tales that add up to a cosmos-spanning epic"; it's a pity this handsome artefact didn't arrive in time for listing in *Interzone* 151, our Moorcock special issue.) No date shown: received in November 1999.



Muir, John Kenneth. **A Critical History of Doctor Who on Television.** McFarland, ISBN 0-7864-0442-6, xi+491pp, hardcover, £48.75. (Illustrated

critical study of the BBC TV children's sf series [or, more exactly, series of series]; first published in the USA, 1999; this is the American edition with a British price added, distributed in the UK by Shelwing Ltd, 127 Sandgate Rd., Folkestone, Kent CT20 2BH; there have been hundreds of books on *Doctor Who*, but is this the first-ever American one? – yes, it probably is; like many US commentators on TV, the author seems to have difficulty getting his head round the concept of a *serial* – for example, he refers to Nigel Kneale's three "Quatermass" serials of the 1950s as "series" [no, they were not! – they had cliffhanger endings to each episode except the last, and they had resolved conclusions]; that apart, he seems to have done a pretty good job of explaining and describing *Doctor Who* here.) 20th January 2000.

Newman, Kim. **Cat People.** "BFI Film Classics." BFI Publishing, ISBN 0-85170-741-6, 79pp, small trade paperback, £7.99. (Illustrated study of producer Val Lewton's and director Jacques Tourneur's horror movie *Cat People* [1943]; first edition; another in the British Film Institute's attractive series of little volumes about classic films; earlier volumes, which were not sent to us for review, included coverage of such sf and fantasy movies as *Bride of Frankenstein* [by Alberto Manguel], *The Ghost and Mrs Muir* [by Frieda Grafe], *The Seventh Seal* [by Melvyn Bragg], *Things to Come* [by Christopher Frayling] and *The Wizard of Oz* [by Salman Rushdie]; Kim Newman now joins that exalted critical company, and about time too; this is an excellent, thought-provoking treatment of a fascinating, if minor, film.) Late entry: October publication, received in November 1999.

Newsinger, John. **The Dredd Phenomenon: Comics and Contemporary Society.** Libertarian Education [Phoenix House, 157 Wells Rd., Bristol BS4 2BU], ISBN 0-9513997-7-2, 99pp, small-press paperback, £5.95. (Critical study of British comics, with a particular emphasis on sf, from *Dan Dare* to *Judge Dredd* and the work of Alan Moore; first edition; parts are expanded from articles originally published in the journals *Foundation* and *Race and Class*; a small book, but it looks to be an interesting one – written from an ultra-leftist perspective.) Late entry: 14th October publication, received in November 1999.

Norton, Andre. **Wind in the Stone.** Avon/Eos, ISBN 0-380-97602-1, 280pp, hardcover, cover by Kinuko Craft, \$23. (Fan-

tasy novel, first edition; Norton has been writing novels since the 1930s, and it seems astonishing that she is still so active; however, her recent novels usually carry hints that much of the writing has been done by others – in this case, the acknowledgments note reads, in part, "with deepest appreciation to Rose Wolf, without whose ability to read scribbled revisions and translate them into smooth prose this book would never have come to be.") 9th November 1999.

Okuda, Ted. **The Monogram Checklist: The Films of Monogram Pictures Corporation, 1931-1952.** "McFarland Classics." McFarland, ISBN 0-7864-0750-6, xi+387pp, trade paperback, \$25. (Illustrated chronological listing, with credits, of all the films released by Hollywood's Monogram studio; first published in the USA, 1987; one of the most downmarket and low-budget fiction factories of its day, Monogram made a number of horror and sf movies in among all its routine westerns, thrillers and comedies; everything is detailed here, in this fully cross-indexed book, and it is information hard to obtain elsewhere.) December 1999.

Park, Severna. **The Annunciate.** Avon/Eos, ISBN 0-380-97737-0, 294pp, hardcover, cover by D. M. Bowers, \$23. (Sf novel, first edition; Park's third novel, packaged [as was her last] with an increasingly impressive array of peer-testimonials – in this case, from Mary Doria Russell, Nalo Hopkinson, Maureen F. McHugh and S. M. Stirling [oops – isn't that last name a bit of a lapse?]; like the previous books, it appears to be well-written lesbian sf, perhaps with a sado-masochistic edge; surprisingly [or maybe not so surprisingly?], it is "lovingly dedicated to William Burroughs for the Algebra of Need.") November 1999.



Paxson, Diana L. **The Book of the Cauldron: The Hallowed Isle, Book Three.** "A Novel of King Arthur." Avon/Eos, ISBN 0-380-80547-2, 180pp, trade paperback, cover by Tom Canty, \$10. (Arthurian fantasy novel, first edition; third in an attractively-packaged tetralogy, the first of two of which, *The Book of the Sword* and *The Book of the Spear*, appeared earlier in 1999.) November 1999.

Penn, Mary E. **In the Dark and Other Ghost Stories.** "Richard Dalby's Mistresses of the Macabre, Volume Two." Edited by Richard Dalby. Illustrated by Paul Lowe. Sarob Press ["Brynderwen," 41 Forest View, Mountain Ash, Wales CF45 3DU], ISBN 1-902309-06-5, xii+124pp, hardcover, cover by Lowe, £20. (Horror collection, first edition; limited to 250 numbered copies; eight genteel ghostly stories by an obscure late-Victorian author [her dates are unknown], only two of which have ever been reprinted before, here disinterred by the indefatigable Mr Dalby; all the stories, which date from 1876 to 1893, come from Mrs Henry Wood's fiction periodical *The Argosy* [not to be confused with the American pulp magazine *Argosy*, published by Frank Munsey, nor the later British *Argosy*, published by Amalgamated Press/Fleetway House from 1926]; like earlier Sarob Press publications, this nicely-produced little volume is highly recommended to those of an antiquarian bent.) No date shown: received in November 1999.

Pinto, Ricardo. **The Chosen: Book One of The Stone Dance of the Chameleon Trilogy.** Bantam, ISBN 0-553-50581-5, viii+713pp, A-format paperback, cover by Jim Burns, £6.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in 1999; a debut novel by a Portuguese-born Scottish author who is a graduate of Dundee University and has worked in computing; reviewed by Tom Arden in *Interzone* 140.) 13th January 2000.

Rankin, Robert. **Sex and Drugs and Sausage Rolls.** Doubleday, ISBN 0-385-60056-9, 272pp, hardcover, cover by John Alexander, £16.99. (Humorous fantasy novel, first edition; a new outing in the loose "Brentford" sequence.) 9th December 1999.

Redfield, James. **The Secret of Shambhala: In Search of the Eleventh Insight.** Bantam Press, ISBN 0-593-04246-8, x+238pp, hardcover, £15.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1999; a follow-up to this American author's previous mystical thrillers, *The Celestine Prophecy* [1993] and *The Tenth Insight* [1996]; we haven't been sent anything by Redfield before now, but apparently he has become quite a bestseller thanks to his "New Age" inspirational appeal; in this one, he utilizes Madame Blavatsky's

old myth of "Shambhala," a lost Tibetan city which supposedly houses all human wisdom; in their blurb, the publishers explicitly equate Shambhala with James Hilton's "Shangri-La," so this novel may well be an attempt at a latter-day *Lost Horizon*.) 9th December 1999.

Robinson, Frank M. **Science Fiction of the 20th Century: An Illustrated History.** Collectors Press [PO Box 230986, Portland, OR 97281, USA], ISBN 1-888054-29-8, 256pp, hardcover, \$59.95. (Copiously illustrated history of sf, concentrating mainly on magazines and books; first edition; there is a simultaneous limited edition with "stunning die-cut presentation box with grommated aluminum face-plate," priced at \$89.95 [not seen]; it has been prepared "with the technical assistance of John Gunnison," who is a pulp-magazine dealer and expert; this is probably the biggest [it's 13 inches tall by 10 inches wide] and, from a visual point of view, the best of all the coffee-table books about sf we have seen in recent decades – beautifully produced, with many rare magazine and book covers; it's also the best-timed, coming as it does at century's end; Robinson's text is sound and engaging, even if it breaks little new ground; recommended.) No date shown: received in November 1999.

Saberhagen, Fred. **Ariadne's Web: The Second Book of the Gods.** Tor, ISBN 0-312-86629-1, 412pp, hardcover, \$25.95. (Fantasy novel, first edition; proof copy received; like its predecessor, *The Face of Apollo*, it's set in ancient Greek times – in Mary Renault-land.) January 2000.

Spinrad, Norman. **Bug Jack Barron.** Afterword by Michael Moorcock. "Toxic Modern Classics." Toxic [CT Publishing, PO Box 5880, Birmingham B16 8JF], ISBN 1-902002-18-0, 254pp, B-format paperback, £6.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1969; originally, famously, serialized in *New Worlds* in 1967-68, this remains Spinrad's best novel and one which, arguably, has gained in relevance over the years; Moorcock's afterword to this 30th-anniversary reissue is fascinating; a welcome reprint to add to the current large crop of "classic" repackagings which fill the shelves; Toxic have also reissued Spinrad's "Hitler wrote science fiction" novel, *The Iron Dream* [1972], but we haven't been sent that.) December 1999.

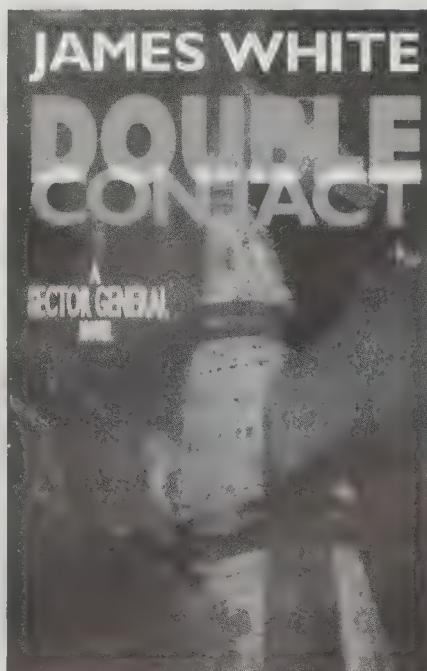
Stapledon, Olaf. **Star Maker.** Foreword by Brian W. Aldiss. "SF Masterworks, 21." Millennium, ISBN 1-85798-807-8, xiv+272pp, B-format paperback, cover by Les Edwards, £6.99. (Sf novel, first published in the UK, 1937; this is what Aldiss referred to in his sf history *Billion Year Spree* as "the one great grey holy book of science fiction" – not

exactly an easy read, but a must-read nevertheless: the sf fan who hasn't read *Star Maker* is a bit like the student of world literature who hasn't read Dante's *Divine Comedy* or Milton's *Paradise Lost*.) 25th November 1999.

Stoddard, James. **The False House.** Earthlight, ISBN 0-671-03749-8, 401pp, A-format paperback, cover by Bob Eggleton, £5.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA [?], 1999; a follow-up to *The High House* [1998], which was well reviewed. 13th December 1999.

Topping, Keith. **Slayer: The Totally Cool Unofficial Guide to Buffy.** Virgin, ISBN 0-7535-0475-8, 280pp, A-format paperback, £6.99. (Episode guide to the horror-comedy TV series *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* [1997-1999], first edition; it's unillustrated and "unofficial," but usefully packed with information and opinion, as Virgin Publishing's neat little TV programme guides usually are; interesting facts department: did you know that Joss Whedon, *Buffy's* creator, is a third-generation TV scriptwriter ["his grandfather worked on *Leave it to Beaver*, his father wrote for *The Dick Cavett Show*"] – and that he himself cut his teeth on writing for *Roseanne*?) 6th January 2000.

White, James. **The First Protector.** "Gene Roddenberry's *Earth: Final Conflict*." Tor, ISBN 0-312-84890-0, 315pp, hardcover, \$23.95. (Sf TV-series spinoff novel, first edition; proof copy received; the new TV series in question is based on unproduced scripts written by Roddenberry in the 1970s and now "developed" by his widow, Majel Barrett Roddenberry; this book came as a surprise – so *Double Contact* [Tor, 1999] was not the last novel James White wrote [see annotated bib-



liography in *Interzone* 150]; it seems he finished this piece of commissioned spinoffery for editor James Frenkel at Tor Books just before his death last year.) February 2000.

VanderMeer, Jeff. **The Hoegbotten Guide to the Early History of Ambergris, by Duncan Shriek.** Necropolitan Press [65 South St., Westborough, MA 01581-1628, USA], no ISBN, 84pp, small-press paperback, cover by Jeffrey Thomas, \$7.99. (Fantasy novella, first edition; "Ambergris" is the imaginary city of VanderMeer's earlier novels, *Dradin*, *In Love* and *The Transformation of Martin Lake*; the conceit here is that this is a guide to the city's history written by the character named Duncan Shriek; three not-so-imaginary characters, Paul Di Filippo, Brian Stableford and Lance Olsen, commend it on the rear cover.) No date shown: received in November 1999.

Wolfe, Gene. **Strange Travelers.** Tor, ISBN 0-312-87227-5, 383pp, hardcover, \$25.95. (Sf/fantasy collection, first edition; proof copy received; the first new collection by Wolfe in quite some time, it contains 15 stories, reprinted from Asimov's, *F&SF*, *Tomorrow* and numerous original anthologies of the 1990s; a major volume from a major writer.) January 2000.

Wylie, Philip, and Edwin Balmer. **When Worlds Collide.** Introduction by John Varley. "Bison Frontiers of Imagination." Bison Books [University of Nebraska Press, PO Box 880484, Lincoln, NE 68588-0484, USA], ISBN 0-8032-9814-5, ix+192+190pp, trade paperback, £9.95. (Sf omnibus, first published in the USA in two volumes as *When Worlds Collide*, 1933, and *After Worlds Collide*, 1934; this is the American edition of October 1999 with a new introduction, and a UK price and publication date; distributed in the UK by Combined Academic Publishers Ltd, 41 Bayston Rd., London N16 7LU; John Varley, who cheerfully admits his ignorance of early sf ["I've read *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea* and *The Time Machine*, and that's about it for works published before 1930"], doesn't tell us so but these two novels are actually examples of pulp-magazine sf, having been serialized in *Blue Book*, September 1932-February 1933 and November 1933-April 1934; Philip Wylie [1902-1971] is said to have done all the writing, with Edwin Balmer [1883-1959] contributing ideas [and no doubt arranging for publication – he worked as an editor for the company which owned *Blue Book*]; the two novels have some of the crudities of the pulp fiction of their time, but still amount to a rattling good old-fashioned story of world-cataclysm and the exploration of a new planet.) December 1999.

NOESIS #5, now into its second year! Stories from Simon Morden, Peter Rush-ton, Guy Martland and others. Our sci-ence feature looks at "How to Detect Extrasolar Planets." 61 Pengarth Rise, Fal-mouth, Cornwall, TR11 2RR. £10.50 annual subscription, £2.75 per single issue (overseas – £12/£3).

<http://www.noesis-sf.co.uk>

INTERZONE complete file to #120 for sale. £140, buyer collects. 01789-488726.

CAJUN CHICKEN SHACK – the alternative fiction magazine. Fourth edi-tion now available for £2. Special offer – for £6 get issues 1-3 and Christmas spe-cial. All available from *Cajun Chicken Shack*, PO Box 2779, Reading RG30 1TU, with cheques payable to *Cajun Chicken Shack*. Enclose an A4 SAE and Get Some Shack. Coming next month, **CEREBRAL FLESH**, our sister magazine – e-mail only.

SF/FANTASY AUTHORS NEEDED for a new publishing house. Send synopsis, 2 sample chapters + SAE to Green Neb-ula, Geoff Wilmetts, 74 Gloucester Road, Bridgwater, Somerset TA6 6EA, UK.

CHRIS GILMORE doesn't just review... Have you a manuscript that needs just that little extra polish to be published? I offer honest opinions and expert atten-tion at reasonable rates. Ring (01234-346142) or write: 27 Salisbury St., Bedford MK41 7RE.

THE SF SUPERSTORE. Fantastic range of sf and fantasy books, videos, games and models. Visit www.orbitaltradingpost.com online.

SMALL ADS



FANTASTIC LITERATURE. Large, regular catalogues of quality science fic-tion, fantasy and horror for sale. Free lists: write now to Fantastic Literature, 35 The Ramparts, Rayleigh, Essex SS6 8PY.

HUGO AWARD-winning *Science Fiction Chronicle*, published since 1979, has all the news of US and UK publishing, plus reviews, interviews, forthcoming books, much, much more. Sample copy £4, sub-scription 6 for £19 airmail, from Algol Press, c/o R. Hansen, 144 Plashet Grove, E. Ham, London E6 1AB.

FREE MONTHLY SF MAGAZINE via e-mail? To receive, send blank message to hologramtales-subscribe@topica.com

THE SPACE STATION stocks Science Fiction paperbacks. Hundreds of titles available. If you want it... we've got it! Send SAE for list. PO Box 1431, Sheffield S25 2BT.

OVER 10,000 SF, Fantasy & Horror paperbacks, hardcovers, magazines, pulps in stock! Rarities to reading copies. Wants lists encouraged, catalogues issued regu-larly. "The Talking Dead," 12 Rosamund Avenue, Merley, Dorset BH21 1TE (01202-849212). Always buying.

CD-ROM SF ENCYCLOPEDIA.

Now available together with David Lang-ford's hugely improved viewer, search and update software (Windows 95/98/NT only). £23.50 or \$35 post free. Viewer without CD-ROM: £11.75 or \$17.50. 94 London Road, Reading, RG1 5AU; ansible@cix.co.uk; www.ansible.demon.co.uk/sfview/

GOT A WEBSITE? Register it @ the only sf & fantasy search engine, www.sfcrownsnest.com – 2.5m hits/month can't be wrong!

BRIGHTON AREA readers of *Interzone* are welcome to join us on Friday nights at The Mitre, a friendly pub on Baker Street (near the Open Market). A few of us meet from 9-11pm, in the smaller of the two rooms, for informal drink and chat. You'll recognize us by the copies of *IZ* or other sf publications lying around – so come along and make yourselves known. (Editors.)

SMALL ADS in *Interzone* reach 10,000 people. If you wish to advertise please send your ad copy, together with payment, to *Interzone*, 217 Preston Drove, Brighton BN1 6FL, UK. Rates: 25 pence per word, minimum of ten words, discount of 10% for insertions repeated in three issues (VAT is inclusive)

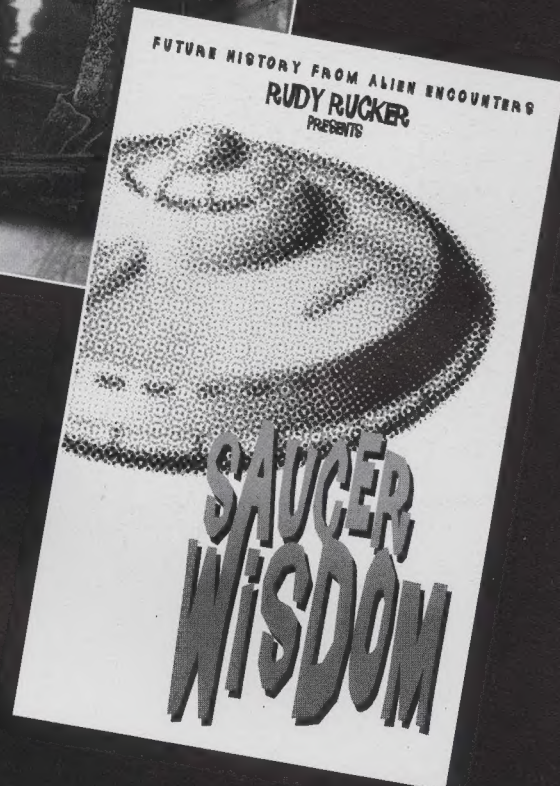
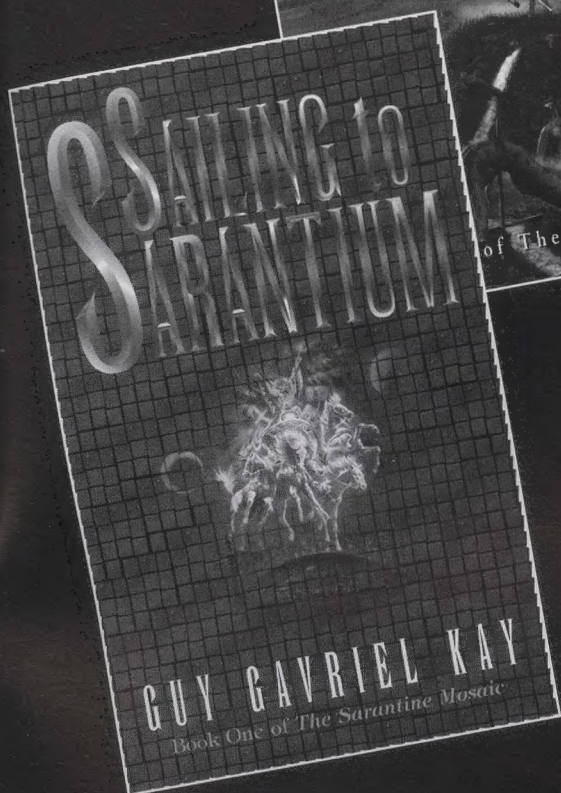
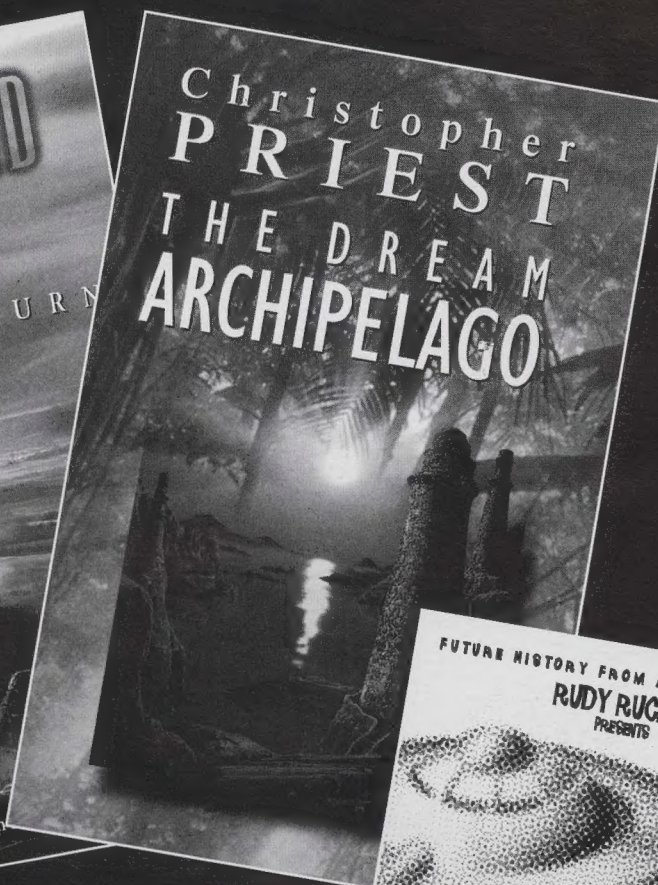
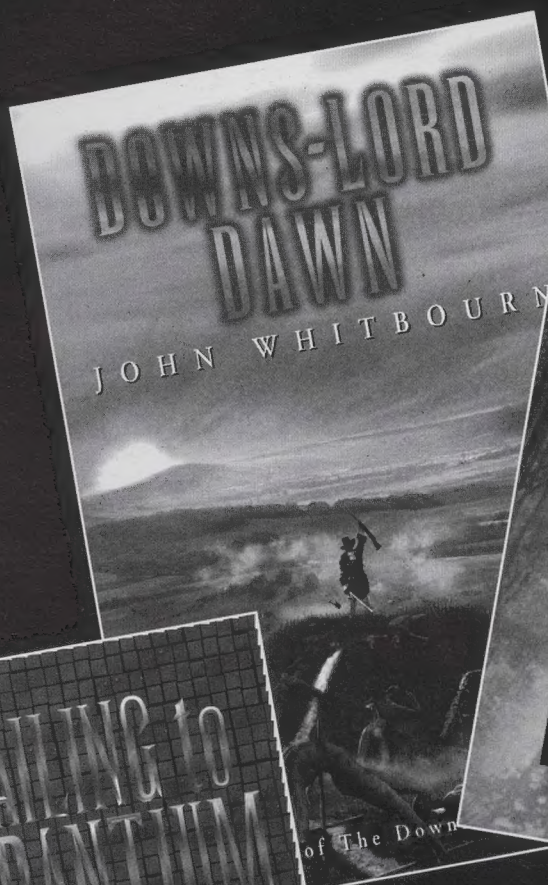


COMING NEXT MONTH

Stephen Baxter treats us to a brand-new story set in his far-future Xeelee universe. There will also be a good range of stories by other talented writers, plus all our usual features and reviews. So don't miss the March issue of *Interzone*, on sale in February.

EARTHLIGHT

Here, Now, and in the Future



Available from all good bookshops

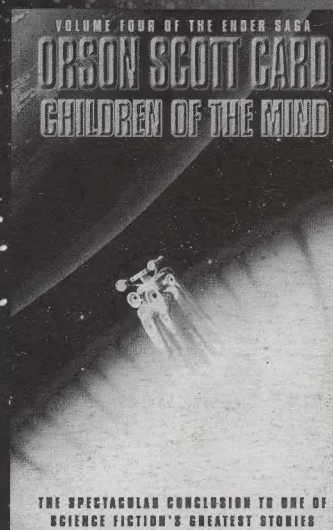
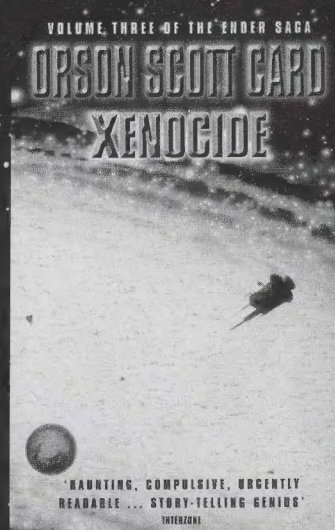
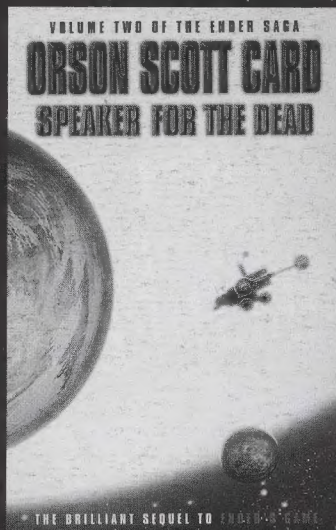
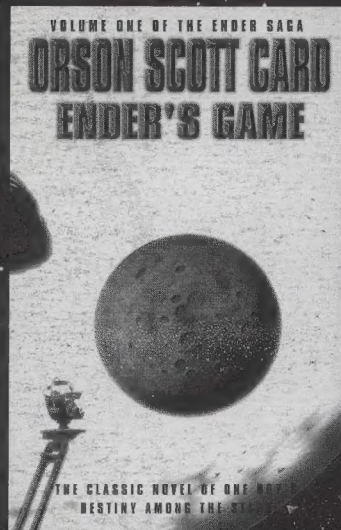


EARTHLIGHT

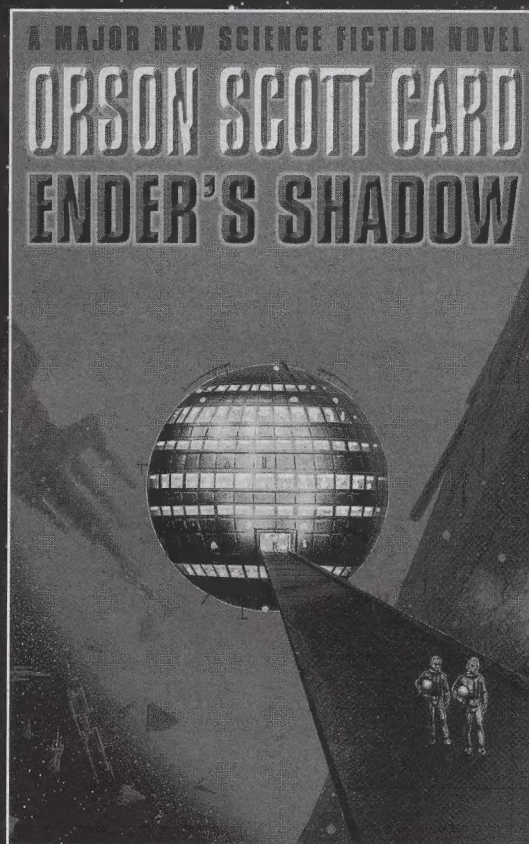
Earthlight is an imprint of Simon & Schuster

ORSON SCOTT CARD

THE CLASSIC ENDER SAGA



'One of the most gripping, exciting science fiction novels of recent times'
SFX on ENDER'S GAME



IT'S TIME TO GO BACK TO BATTLE SCHOOL



<http://www.orbitbooks.co.uk>

**THIS SCAN IS
COURTESY OF THE
LENNY SILVER
COLLECTION**